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The Impact of School Board Governance on Academic Achievement in Diverse States

Michael Ford
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN DIVERSE STATES

by

Michael Ford

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ABSTRACT
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Michael Ford

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The overwhelming majority of students receiving a publicly funded education in the United States attend a public school in a district overseen by a democratically elected school board. Despite the dominant market share of democratically elected school boards, academic scholarship is increasingly focused on alternative governance structures such as mayoral control, charter schools, and school vouchers. Much research on traditional school boards is in fact skeptical of the capacity for such boards to positively impact academic performance. This dissertation shifts focus back to the almost 14,000 elected school boards in the United States, using original survey data from six strategically chosen states to connect school board governance with district level academic outcomes. The dissertation examines the connections between school board member backgrounds, adherence to a set of best practices created by the National School Boards Association, small group dynamics, and district graduation and dropout rates. The study finds that the way in which school boards govern does affect district level performance. Specifically, school boards that engage in strategic planning, view their superintendent as a collaborator, and mitigate conflict, perform better on academic outcome indicators. The

study also presents limited data on non-profit charter school boards, proposes a theoretical model of school board governance, and reviews prior research on school boards and performance. The overall conclusion is that traditional school boards can and do influence academic outcomes, meaning, improving school board governance is a legitimate approach to improving academic achievement.

DEDICATION

To Ally, Charlie and John, for your support throughout this process.

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Chapter I.
The Problem of the American School Board

Are school boards needed? What do they do? How do they do it? More importantly, does what they do affect student outcomes? If so, how can they do what they do better? The goal of this dissertation is to better understand the relationship between school board governance and academic achievement.

Specifically, quantitative methods are used to connect soft measures of the governance behavior perceptions of public school board members with hard data on district academic outcomes. The amorphous concept of governance is defined as the process by which board members make a series of situation dependent decisions that chart the trajectory of an organization.

Even more specifically this study seeks to better understand what makes the decisions board members make the right ones. Is it who board members are? Is it the concepts on which board members focus? Is it the way in which they make decisions? Is it the environment in which those decisions are made? Or, is it come combination of all of the above? Answering these questions will not only clarify the place of the school board in an education reform environment increasingly hostile to traditional school boards, but also give insight into how other types of boards, non-profit and government in particular, might go about improving their effectiveness.

This dissertation seeks to answer the research question: How does school board governance impact academic outcomes? That school board governance can impact academic outcomes is supported. A major research study conducted by the Iowa School Boards Foundation called the Lighthouse Inquiry established that boards overseeing high achieving school districts demonstrate different sets of characteristics than those

overseeing low-achieving districts (Delagardelle, 2008; Rice et. al., 2000). In addition, the literature on board governance generally shows a connection between governance behaviors and organizational performance in the non-profit and government sectors (Carver, 2006; Ihrke & Niederjohn, 2005; Gabris & Davis, 2006).

It is less clear exactly how school board governance impacts academic outcomes. This study looks in-depth at the role of school board governance by utilizing originally collected survey results of school board members serving in six states in order to:

1) Establish a modern working definition of the role of school boards: To improve academic outcomes.
2) Propose an original theoretical model of governance explaining how governance connects to outcomes.
3) Test the relationship between the demographics and backgrounds of board members and outcomes.
4) Test the relationship between widely used school board governance best practices and outcomes.
5) Test the relationship between group dynamics and outcomes.
6) Discuss the alternative governance structure of non-profit charter school boards.

A Brief Introduction to the School Board

The basic purpose of public education is relatively simple: Provide students an education that prepares them to be productive adults, and do so in an efficient manner. Given this simple purpose the two groups most directly impacted by education policy are public school pupils and taxpayers. These groups overlap and combine to include just

about every citizen of the United States. The wide reach of public education makes it a policy area that is well measured, subject to political experiment, and frequently debated among experts and novices alike.

Despite the high-visibility of education policy there remains no consensus on how K-12 education should be delivered. The sheer diversity of student and community populations and needs makes the existence of a single best method of delivering education implausible; though this has not stopped well-meaning scholars and policy-makers from looking. Classroom reforms like small-class sizes and the use of technology, governance reforms such as mayoral control, and attempts to reform public education from outside of the system such as school vouchers all have one thing in common: Mixed results that are dependent on any number of variables.

Thus elected school boards, which oversee the education of the vast majority of American students, face a basic problem: How do they go about maximizing the academic success of the districts they represent? Is it by establishing the right district culture? Education professors Kent Peterson and Terrence E. Deal summarize the importance of school culture thusly: "[A] positive school culture improves school effectiveness and productivity" (Peterson & Deal, 2009, p. II). In other words, things like mission, management, and clarity of purpose in a school or district impact whether that school or district can achieve its aims. The strength of a concept like culture is that every organization has one that is, presumably, influenced by its governing board.

But boards are much more than elected bodies that set the tone of an organization. They also make personnel decisions, serve as the microphone for an organization, authorize charter schools, lobby for more resources, advocate for their students, and do

any number of other things that vary depending on the board members themselves and the districts they represent.

There is, however, one place where all governance boards are alike. They are all small groups of people. Previous work has focused on who serves on schools boards and what they do (Hess & Weeks, 2011). However very little attention has been paid to the way in which board members go about their work. Governance in this study is defined as the process by which a small group of people collectively makes a series of situation dependent decisions. It follows that it matters not only who board members are and the issues upon which they focus, but also the way in which they go about making decisions. The following chapters consider the role of demographics and best practices in governance success, but adds the key missing component of small group dynamics. The results show that who board members are matters only in the context of how it relates to what they do and how they do it.

In other words, there is evidence that school district outcomes can be improved through improved governance, but it is more complicated than getting better people to serve on boards. Maximizing the potential of school boards requires making the right decisions in the right way. It requires improved governance.

History of the School Board and Literature Review

The origins of the traditional American school board can be traced back to 1789, when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed a state law that required every Massachusetts town to open and support a local public school. The law also authorized towns to employ a board to oversee the school (Callahan, 1975). The statute would eventually be amended to make the board mandatory, and the City of Boston in particular

decided that the board be a democratically elected body insulated from "elitist tendencies," (Callahan, 1975 p. 19). What began in Massachusetts spread throughout the republic, and a locally elected public school board became the norm throughout the United States.

Notably, student academic outcomes have traditionally not been seen as a priority of local school boards. In 1959 political scientist Thomas Eliot described the duties of the American School board as "to hire and support a competent professional as superintendent, defend the schools against public criticism, and persuade the people to open their pocketbooks," (Eliot, 1959, p. 1033). Eliot's description accurately describes the role of a school board for much of the institution's history.

The roles and responsibilities of public school boards have however, evolved in important ways in the 20th century. According to the National Center for Education Statistics the number of American school districts declined dramatically from over 117,000 in 1940 to about 18,000 in 1971. Since then the number of districts has declined slowly, today there are fewer than 14,000 school districts in the United States. As previously mentioned, those districts almost universally have democratically elected boards, something indicative of the long history of local control of education in the United States (Peterson, 1981).

The governance of public schools changed dramatically in the 1990s as non-district charter schools began to proliferate (Wong & Langevin, 2007). Charter schools are technically public schools, but they operate outside the traditional public school regulatory framework. Non-district charter schools are a focus of this study because they are authorized by an entity other than a school district (such as a University) and

correspondingly have independent governing boards. Today a majority of U.S. states have laws authorizing charter schools, but the laws vary widely (Wong & Langevin, 2007).

The early literature on the American school board is remarkably sparse and focused on the demographics of board members. Lloyd Ashby's 1968 work, *The Effective School Board Member* best represents the scholarship on school boards up to that point. Ashby advocates judging the effectiveness of a school board almost entirely by inputs: Are schools fully staffed? Are classes provided for below average, average, and above average students? Are staff qualified? etc. (Ashby, 1968, pp. 142-143). Ashby suggests that business acumen is the ideal quality for a board member. However, Ashby's work uses limited empirical data in favor of theory and anecdotes.

The first wide-scope study of the American school board was commissioned by the National School Boards Association and released as an edited volume in 1975 by Peter J. Cistone. The volume, *Understanding School Boards,* focuses on the rapidly changing environment school boards were facing as school segregation came to an end. L. Harmon Zeigler (1975), in the volume, concludes that school boards administer a service to a specific subset of urban society and do not serve the public at-large. He questions the usefulness of elected boards given their high rate of specialization. Zeigler's conclusions are antiquated in the face of high profile fiscal crises and the growing politicization of education reform; the actions of school boards are no longer detached from urban political debate. The simple existence of taxing authority has ensured that school boards remain political bodies exposed to special interest pressures.

Raymond Callahan (1975), also as part of the same National School Boards Association project, concludes that there are three major roles and responsibilities for school boards. First is the power to hire and fire superintendents and teachers, second is the power to implement a curriculum, and third is the power to make budget decisions. Mosher (1975) goes further than Callahan and states that finance and budget decisions are the most prominent school board responsibility. However, both Callahan and Mosher fail to consider the restrictions boards face as they make finance decisions. Overall, the Cistone volume serves as a call for scholars to take seriously the role of American school boards as a political institution.

Paul Peterson (1981) examined school boards from a federalism perspective, concluding that boards are often in conflict with state government as they attempt to maximize shared revenue while minimizing mandates. Murphy (1991) similarly examines how districts seek to implement the mandates included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in a way that maximizes positive impacts on student achievement. Spillane (1996) offers a spirited defense of the school board, concluding that local expertise is necessary for implementing state instructional programs. Peterson, Murphy, and Spillane are typical of much of the research in the 1980s and 1990s; all three sought to describe how school boards balance spending with mandates from higher levels of government.

The turn of the century changed the tone of board scholarship, William G. Howell's 2005 edited volume, *Besieged,* describes the typical American school board as under attack from school choice programs and mayoral governance reforms. Wong and Shen (2005) in particular argue that mayoral control of school systems, under the right

circumstances, can increase levels of achievement. Viteritti (2005) went as far as to declare local education politics obsolete. He cites low voter turnout in board elections as evidence of school boards' non-democratic tendencies.

Moe (2005), in Howell's volume, conducts the first major study of special interest politics in school board elections, finding that teacher unions are the most dominant force in board elections. Wong and Shen (2005) draw broadly on Moe's conclusion as evidence that school board elections are dominated by special interests, plagued by low-voter turnout, and can be impediments to increasing levels of academic achievement. Policy debates in large cities across the country have been informed by Wong and Shen's conclusions that boards can be a hindrance to learning.

However, there is a significant research gap that leave Wong and Shen's conclusions unsatisfying. Hochschild (2005) points out that scholars do not have a full understanding of what school boards can or cannot do. Is the perceived problem the institution, or its actions? If special interest participation and low-voter turnout de-legitimize school boards, why are other local and state governments whose elections have low-turnouts and strong interest group participation not deemed illegitimate as well?

Economist Jason Grissom (2012) begins to fill in a research gap on school boards by linking the level of conflict on California school boards to growth in district performance. He finds that school board member conflict (as determined by surveys of board members and superintendents) is generally negatively associated with student achievement. Grissom concludes there is a need to better understand the pathways connecting board governance and student achievement. My dissertation will better conceptualize these pathways and look at aspects of governance beyond conflict.

A parallel track of scholarship has focused on the impact of racial and gender representation on school boards. Melissa Deckman (2007), for example, finds basic differences in the reasons men and women run for school board. Men are more likely to say they want to impact government policy, and more likely to cite religious motivations than women. These differing motivations provide reasons to suspect that the gender of school board members relates to district performance. A preliminary study by this author testing the relationship between board member gender and academic outcomes in Wisconsin, for example, found that female majority boards generally govern over comparably higher achieving school districts (Ford, 2012).

Melissa Marschall (2005) finds that minority parents in school districts with minority school board members have higher levels of satisfaction with their schools than minority parents in districts without minority board members. Given the significant role that non-school home-life factors have in predicting academic outcomes, Marschall's findings are substantively significant.

Kenneth Meier has done significant work on the role of racial representation and diversity on school boards. Meier & Stewart (1991) examine over 100 diverse school districts and find that board members will often respond to board conflict by forming race-based coalitions and/or multi-racial coalitions based on predictable patterns. Luis Fraga, Meier, & Robert England (1986) use data from about three dozen school districts to identify a link between Hispanic school board representation and Hispanic employment levels in school districts. Meier & England (1984) also look at urban districts specifically and find that African-American representation on school boards is linked with more equitable district policies.

The body of research on gender and racial representation solidifies the need to consider the demographics of board members in attempts to explain their behavior. Though much emphasis in this study is on how school board members go about making decisions, it is crucial to understand that demographics play a substantial part in forming individual board members' decision premises (Simon, 1972).

Comparative Case Study Approach

This study takes a comparative case study approach to answer the question of how school board governance impacts student achievement. Specifically, survey results from school board members from Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, Florida, and Nevada are pooled with archival data from the National Center for Education Statistic's Common Core Data Set and from individual state education agencies to identity and explain meaningful commonalities and differences between states.

The logic of using a case study approach, as well as the logic of the chosen cases is grounded in the nature of school boards. School boards are a creation of state government and operate under unique laws that make an overall generalizable study more difficult and likely less informative than comparative case studies. While there are certainly commonalities among all school boards in the United States, there are vast state-to-state differences that need to be considered to make valid conclusions about the institution.

The relative strength of teacher unions is different in Nevada, Florida and Utah compared to Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin (where recent events have made the continued strength of unions unclear). The task of a school board member that must deal heavily with unions is appreciably different than a school board member that does not

deal with organized labor and collective bargaining. School board members in the included states also operate in very different accountability climates. A 2007 analysis of standards used by states to measure their progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) shows Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan all have lax standards compared to Nevada, Utah, and Florida (Carey, 2007). However, the recent granting of NCLB accountability waivers in several states as well as the well-documented flaws of the NCLB accountability framework make this too, an evolving issue.

A multi-state case study approach will allow for conclusions across groups of similar and dissimilar states, as well as specific insights resulting from state-to-state comparisons. According to Boston University Political Scientist John Gerring (2007) a case study is appropriate when an intensive study of one or more cases can yield valuable information about all cases. In this study, there is a potential for fifty different cases due to the fact that state governments authorize school boards and all operate in a constricted environment determined by the unique legal and demographic make-up of their respective states. Conducting fifty different case studies is ideal, but logistically prohibitive and unnecessary to answer the presented research question. Instead, two dissimilar groups of three similar cases will be used. Two approaches to case study research will be deployed: 1) The use of most-similar cases, and 2) The use of most-different cases (Gerring, 2007, p. 88). The hybrid approach will allow for conclusions through the study of commonalities between all cases, and the specific differences between the dissimilar groupings.

As mentioned two groups of three states have been selected based on their characteristics. Group one consists of less unionized states with a small number of large

school districts and significantly lower levels of per-pupil spending and employee benefit costs (see Tables 1.2 and 1.2). Group Two consists of heavily unionized states in the Great Lakes region that contain large numbers of small school districts and high levels of per-pupil spending and employee benefit costs (see Tables 1.1 and 1.2). Their geographic proximity is also relevant as specific education policies that impact school boards, such as the use of charter schools, have diffused between these states (Wong & Langevin, 2007).

Table 1.1: Characteristics of School Districts in Selected States

State	Districts	Average Schools Per-District	Average Students Per-District	Average Teachers Per-District
Group 1				
Nevada	17	36	25,352	1,289
Utah	41	28	13,311	560
Florida	67	67	39,150	2,762
Group 2				
Wisconsin	424	5	2,035	138
Michigan	552	7	2,790	155
Minnesota	340	6	2,360	146

Table 1.2: Average Per-Pupil Costs in Selected States

State	Total Per-Pupil Cost	Per-Pupil Fringe Benefit Cost
Group 1		
Nevada	$8,442	$1,917
Utah	$6,356	$1,594
Florida	$8,769	$1,649
Group 2		
Wisconsin	$11,078	$2,807
Michigan	$11,098	$2,713
Minnesota	$11,098	$3,140

In addition to the public school boards in the selected states, surveys were sent to school board members governing charter schools operating in Wisconsin and Michigan. Charter school boards differ from district school boards in several substantive ways. Most important, board members are appointed and not elected. Second, charter school boards usually oversee a single school rather than a system of schools. Third, charter schools receive less state and local aids than traditional public schools.

Modeling School Board Governance

Figure 1.1 is an overly simplified model of the two basic relationships guiding this dissertation. First, the skills and backgrounds of board members are assumed to impact the manner in which board members govern. Second, the action of governance is hypothesized to impact the academic performance of districts and schools. Crucial to understanding these relationships is an examination of the activities that are decided upon during the governance process. Clearly, Figure 1.1 fails to satisfy as an explanatory model, it does however provide a starting point from which to discuss the subjects of the situation dependent decisions made during the governance process.

Figure 1.1: Model Connecting School Board Governance to District Performance
Board Member Backgrounds → Governance → Performance

The aforementioned Lighthouse inquiry speculates that there are seven characteristics of effective school board governance (Delagardelle, 2008):

1. Connections across the system
2. Knowing what it takes to change achievement
3. Workplace support

4. Professional development
5. A balance between direction and building-level autonomy
6. A strong community connection
7. Distributed leadership

Delagardelle's list contains several important inputs (a basic knowledge of education, connections to the community, etc) that might be theorized to predict the performance of a board, as well as several structural conditions (distributed leadership, workplace support, etc.) that bear further study. While the survey used for this dissertation was designed to gather data that can be used to better understand the value of the Lighthouse model, emphasis will also be placed on measuring the role of governance beyond the inputs and conditions in which a board operates.

Hypotheses and Descriptions of Data

Guiding this project is the broad, informed, but preliminary assumption that school board governance behavior relates to district performance in quantitatively measurable ways. Three specific hypotheses will be the focus of the project.

Hypothesis 1: Greater adherence to the eight components of the National School Board Association's (NSBA) *Key Work of School Boards* positively impacts district level academic outcomes.

The NSBA describes in detail the eight components it believes are essential to using governance to raise academic achievement (Gemberling et. al., 2000). The components on the list are:

- Vision
- Standards

- Assessment
- Accountability
- Alignment
- Climate
- Collaboration
- Community Engagement
- Continuous Improvement

The list, however, is the product of consensus, not research. Surveying board members on the extent to which their board is adhering to the NSBA's key components provides data that can be connected to district outcomes; thereby verifying or calling into question their use as best practices.

Hypothesis 2: The presence of dynamics typical to a high-functioning small group on a school board positively impacts district level academic success.

As mentioned, small groups in government and non-profit agencies have been shown to demonstrate predictable characteristics that can be measured via survey and shown to affect group outcomes (Ihrke & Niederjohn, 2005; Gabris & Davis, 2006). Theoretically, school boards should operate like other small groups and the presence or lack of presence of factors typical of a high functioning group should be related to organizational outcomes. Specific sub-hypotheses grounded in the following three aspects of board governance will be tested: 1. Conflict 2. Board design, and 3. Governance model.

Conflict

The impact of conflict within small groups differs depending on the type of conflict and the way in which it manifests. Morton Deutsch (1973) for example theorizes that the likelihood of conflict within a group is dependent on the timing of the consequences of adopting a specific position. Deutsch also discusses the characteristics of destructive and constructive conflict, arguing that the measurement of results is the best way to determine the nature of conflict. Lewis Coser (1956) helpfully hypothesizes on the determinants of destructive and constructive conflict, concluding that ideologically tinged conflict is the most entrenched and destructive. However, he also concludes that conflict can serve a positive social function by creating a mechanism to relieve tension that enables better decision-making within groups.

Qualitative work by Karen Jehn (1997) furthers the understanding of small-group conflict by dividing it into three types. The first, relationship conflict, appears as personal animosity and/or frustration between board members. Such conflict could bog down the governance process and negatively impact student achievement by preventing timely policy-making. In other words, an unresponsive board may be unlikely to react quickly to district and school challenges.

The second type of conflict is task conflict. Task conflict is when board members have legitimate differences over the vision and policies of the board. Such conflict is substantive, not personal. The presence of task conflict may be an indicator of an engaged board and should be expected to increase school and district performance. Conversely, the absence of task conflict likely means a board is disengaged, or bogged down in relationship conflict. Either way, performance should be expected to suffer.

The third type of conflict is process conflict. Process conflict is disagreement between board members on the way in which certain tasks should be done; for example which committee should take up a specific policy proposal, how long a topic should be debated, etc. There is reason to suspect the presence of process conflict on a board negatively impacts school and district performance. Specifically, focus on process may be a safe harbor for boards that are unable or unwilling to address education policy.

Board Design

The second relevant aspect of board governance is board design. Design matters because board attributes such as stability, shared politics, and the nature by which board members begin their service likely affects what board members care about and how they interact (Renz, 2004). For example, a long serving board might be expected to make policy in a more efficient (and responsive) manner due to familiarity. Also important is the manner in which a board member is elected (or for charter school boards, appointed). A board member that won a contested election is likely more sensitive to political concerns than a board member that won an uncontested election.

Governance Model

The third aspect of board governance theorized to impact performance is the governance model deployed by the board. Many boards likely use the traditional model, which stresses top-down governance and process (Bradshaw et. al, 2007). Others likely use the policy governance model, where a formal policy is created to deal with specific governance questions (Carver, 2006). Still others likely use the corporate model of governance.

Hypothesis 3: Boards with larger zones of discretion have better academic outcomes.

As discussed earlier, school boards face limits on their ability to make policy (Kirst, 2008). Limiting factors includes state and federal mandates, teacher unions, constituents, and spending caps (Howell, 2005). Surveying board members on their proclivity to make policy decisions beyond what is required under state law will allow for a quantitative analysis of whether enacting policies that go beyond what is required by law is connected to better student outcomes.

Three types of data will be used to test the listed hypotheses. The first is archival data on school districts from the Common Core of Data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Several variables for all school districts in the country, and hence the eventual sample, are available. The first set of variables is descriptive:

- Address;
- Phone numbers;
- Numbers of schools in the district;
- Numbers of students in the district;
- Number of teachers in the district;
- Teacher/student ratio in the district;
- Number of English Language Learners in the district;
- Numbers of students with IEPS in the district;
- Census classification of districts;
- Breakdown of total district staff including guidance counselors, librarians, district and school administrators;
- District revenue by source;

- District expenditures broken down by category including instructional, students and staff support, administration, operations, capital spending, interest on debt; and
- District census data on the population served by the district; age race, etc.

The variables listed above are used to build a statistical portrait of school districts and charter schools in my selected states, and then linked with original survey data collected from public school board members.

The second major data source is the survey results from traditional and charter school board members. A similar survey was used by Ihrke & Niederjohn (2006) to measure the presence of conflict on Wisconsin city councils. The authors sent surveys to 617 board members on 57 councils, and achieved an overall response rate of 23.8%. A similar response rate was obtained for this study.

The third data source consists of variables that indicate the level of academic performance in school districts. NCES data on high school graduation and dropout rates, as well as limited in-state test score data are used as indicators of attainment and performance at the school district level.

Across state comparable standardized test score data is impossible to obtain because of the widespread use of criterion reference tests developed by individual states. The six states in my study all use different tests: The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam, Michigan Educational Assessment Program, Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (used in Utah), the Nevada Proficiency Examination Program, and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. However, all tests do have specific cut-off points that indicate proficiency; meaning the percentage of

students in each school district scoring proficient on the state test is sparsely used as a common, though imperfect indicator of district achievement levels.

Another potential problem with connecting board governance with academic outputs is the lag time between a governance decision and the time its impact (or lack of impact) on district performance is felt. A multitude of methods, including the use of statistical models restricted by a board stability variable, are used to mitigate the possibility of a governance time lag.

Methodology

Quantitative methods are deployed to analyze the collected data. The specific methodologies used include:

- Simple means comparisons tests to establish the demographic differences of schools and districts, school and district performance, school board member demographics, and school board member attitudes;
- Linear regression analyses explaining the relationship between school demographics and resources, school demographics and performance, school resources and performance, school board governance behavior and outcomes, and various other relationships between board member behaviors and school and district outcomes; and
- A logistic regression analysis predicting reading test score gains across states.

A study of school board governance in California by Jason Grissom (2012) demonstrates how school board member survey response variables can be modeled with academic outcome variables. Grissom surveyed 1,111 school board members and obtained responses from 63 percent. He averaged out responses at the board level when

multiple members from a single board responded. Using district level testing results from the California Department of Education as his dependent variable and survey responses as independent variables Grissom conducted several multi-variate regression analyses. The methodology deployed by Grissom informs some of the methodology used in this analysis.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The preceding chapter included a literature review of school board governance, a description of the research question, a brief overview of the data used in this study, and the three hypotheses that are tested. But the title of this introductory chapter is *The Problem of the American School Board*. So, what is the problem? Simply, there is no consensus about what school boards should be doing, what they have the power to do, what they actually do, or how they do it. The lack of consensus has led scholars to too often dismiss or ignore the institution of the school board. Studies of alternative forms of school district governance proliferate while the dominant structure governing the delivery of public education in the United States is attacked as irrelevant.

The following chapters will show that school boards are not irrelevant by first defining their role, tasks and limitations, second proposing an explanatory model linking school board governance to academic outcomes, third establishing the variables which affect academic outcomes in the six states of interest, fourth testing hypotheses linking board governance to academic outcomes, and fifth exploring the alternative non-profit charter school board. The overall approach is perhaps out-of-step with the title of this chapter, as it is built on the premise that the American school board is not a problem, but rather akin to a jigsaw puzzle - a very old jigsaw puzzle. Like an old jigsaw puzzle I

fully expect to end up with some missing pieces, some weathered pieces, and perhaps even a final picture that is laughably out-of-date. Regardless, the following eight chapters will provide an in depth understanding of how and why school board governance affects student outcomes.

Chapter II.
An Alternative View of the School Board: Role, Tasks, and Discretionary Zones

Why do school boards exist? It is a simple question on the surface, but one that gets more complicated the deeper one digs. This chapter of the study argues that the absence of widespread agreement on the proper role of school boards is due to confusion between the tasks executed by school boards, and the role of school boards. Both are important concepts, but both are fundamentally different. Going further, I argue that the role of school boards, if they are to survive, must be universally understood as maximizing the student achievement levels in their district. It is the tasks and ways in which they engage in them that determine whether their role is met. Necessary in understanding the tasks of school boards is recognizing the discretionary zones in which they operate.

The Role of School Boards

As mentioned in Chapter One, Political Scientist Thomas Eliot opined in 1959 that the role of the school board is "to hire and support a competent professional as superintendent, defend the schools against public criticism, and persuade the people to open their pocketbooks," (Eliot, 1959, p. 1033). Perhaps in 1959, when there were no popular alternative structures to perform the basic tasks of school boards, this was an adequate description. Plainly, in 1959 the tasks of school boards were the same as their role because no alternative vision existed.

But things changed mightily after 1959. In particular, two occurrences in the mid-1960s fundamentally altered the way in which local education was delivered in the United States. First, the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA) in 1965 dramatically increased the role of state and federal government in local education. Second, the rising influence of two national teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, brought collective bargaining rights to most districts, permanently changing the nature of school board politics. Simply, the quaint idea of an apolitical board that solely performs an administrative function ceased to exist (Epstein, 2004). Both the money flowing to and mandates hoisted upon school districts increasingly originated from factors beyond the control of local school boards. Yet, the academic literature on school boards for the most part continued (and continues) to define the role of the school board as a series of tasks. Deborah Land (2002) reviews existing literature on school board governance and concludes the popularly understood function of the school board is to make policies. Again, this may be what boards do, but is it their function?

Norman Kerr (1964) argues that the school board exists simply to legitimize the actions of the district by showing that initiatives are vetted and approved by accountable and democratically elected officials. The dissatisfaction theory of local governance posits something similar, that school board members are voted out of office when the public becomes dissatisfied with their policies (Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008). William Howell and Christopher Berry (2005) find evidence of this in South Carolina, concluding school board elections do serve a public accountability function. Jon Pierre (1999) argues that local government boards, including school boards, exist to maximize state aid to the community.

All of these explanations provide some idea of why school boards exist, but fail to get at defining their core role. Accountability for academic performance, for example, is

increasingly a core function of state government. For example, the No Child Left Behind Waiver approved in Wisconsin in 2012 allows the state to directly intervene in the operations of low-performing schools. In Michigan, a special purpose government called the Education Achievement System exists specifically to run low-performing schools. Perhaps there is potential for school boards to serve a democratic accountability function, but the continued widespread development of accountability systems that act more swiftly than democracy suggest that this should not and cannot be the institution's core role if it is to survive.

Maximizing state aid also appears on the surface a logical role for school boards. However the universal use of equalization and/or minimum foundation programs by states to fund schools makes this role obsolete. In most states, state aid to school districts is mostly determined by the number of students enrolled in district schools and some type of formula that determines how much state aid is needed given the district's local revenue generating capacity. Sure, districts can seek to maximize enrollment, but that is hardly a core governance function.

A tempting landing spot is to conclude that school boards exist to serve the essential function of running schools. Or, school boards exist because of a lack of other options. The proliferation of education vouchers for private schools, independent charter schools that operate outside of traditional school districts, the emergence of special purpose governments to run schools in Louisiana, Michigan and Tennessee, and the elimination of traditional school boards in several large American cities show that school boards are not in fact needed to deliver public education (Howell, 2005; Viteritti, 2005). The emergence of public education options outside of school board authority, though still

the exception and not the rule, provides urgency to the task of defining the proper role of the school board (Levin, 2002).

So what is the proper role of school boards? Ideally, to maximize the academic output of the school districts they oversee. The rest of this chapter and the rest of this dissertation will explore how school boards go about, and should go about, executing this role. This defined role satisfies for many reasons. First, it is simple and vague enough that it can apply to the over 14,000 school boards operating in diverse policy and interpersonal environments. Second, it presumes that school boards are the school governance agent most capable of ensuring American students are well educated. The continued failure of alternative governance structures to deliver outcomes substantially better than traditional school districts, as well as the overwhelming market share of traditional school districts, makes this presumption logical (Wong et. al., 2007; Levin, 2004). Third, it is a role that is measurable, though imperfectly, using widely available student performance data.

The Tasks of School Boards

Having defined the role of school boards the next logical questions to consider are, what do school boards do? And what tasks do boards engage in? Here too the answer is surprisingly complex and requires a discussion of the types of tasks school boards generally execute, as well the development of a continuum of tasks from broad to specific that together comprise the action of governance. First, however, it is necessary to differentiate between the things that individual board members do in their official capacities, and the things that boards do. In this study both the board and the board

member are relevant units of analysis, but it is impossible to understand one without understanding the other.

According to a national survey of American school board members the average board member is likely to be white, have a bachelor's degree or higher, most likely moderate and more likely conservative than liberal in their political views, slightly more likely to be male than female, and likely be receiving a relatively little or no salary for their service (Hess & Meeks, 2011). Boards members in general also are most likely to have been elected to their position with relative ease in a campaign that spent less than $1,000 (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

As can be seen in Figure 2.1, there are various board member tasks that sit on different ends of a specific to broad continuum. For example, school board members, as democratically elected officials, broadly represent the views of their constituents. Though the task of representation may be markedly different for members representing at-large positions on boards than district seats, and will likely manifest in different ways, the overall concept of representation is consistent. Running for reelection is another broad school board member task; all must do it but the specifics of how will vary. The adoptions of formal and informal roles on the board are two more broad tasks (Smoley, 1999). Formal roles may include committee memberships and officer positions like treasurer and board president. The formal roles taken and the ways in which they are fulfilled will vary by member, but all will serve some formal role. The informal roles of individual board member will also vary and be dependent on the way in which the group interacts, but positions as peacemaker, listener, etc. are likely to develop within a board and manifest in different ways (Smoley, 1999).

The more specific tasks of board members relate to the day-to-day work of serving on a local government board. This includes meeting with constituents, attending board meetings and committee meetings, and voting on district policies. The tasks included in Figure 2.1 are not meant to be an exhaustive list, individual board members engage in any number of activities that range from very specific to very broad. Importantly, these individual board member tasks are not board governance tasks. They may impact the governance process, they may be signs of an effective or ineffective board member, but they are individual tasks.

Figure 2.1 – The Continuum of School Board Member Tasks

Specific	Broad
<----------	---------->
Vote on district policies	Represent constituents
Meet with constituents	Run for election
Attend board member training	Adopt formal board roles
Attend board meetings	Adopt informal board roles

A school board, which in its most simple form is merely a group of school board members engaging in formal duties, also performs collective tasks that can be placed on a specific to broad continuum. Existing academic literature gives a general overview of what school boards do. Paul Hill (2004) lists a multitude of oversight tasks school boards engage in; specifically boards manage:

- Facilities;
- Professional staff and support staff;
- School and pupil funding;
- Curriculum;
- Transportation of pupils;

- School attendance;
- Dispute resolution;
- Implementation of state and federal categorical aid programs;
- Federal civil rights laws; and
- Vendor contracts.

Collectively Hill's list comprises the specifics that go into the day-to-day management of district operations. In other words, school boards work collectively to make the trains run on time. Mary Delagardelle (2008) takes an alternative approach and describes the tasks of school boards primarily through the broad lens of guiding student learning. The specific tasks include creating a board "vision and direction for student learning," creating district policies, allocating resources, and monitoring academic achievement initiatives (Delagardelle, 2008, p. 191).

Figure 2.2 – The Continuum of School Board Tasks

Specific Broad

<---------->

Budgeting	Management of district operations
Creating a formal board vision	Guiding student learning
Monitoring student achievement	Aligning resources with mission
Hiring the superintendent	Keeping the public informed
Negotiating contracts with teachers	Managing human capital

Raymond Callahan (1975) argues that school boards perform just three major tasks: 1). Hiring and firing the superintendents and teachers 2) Implementing a curriculum, and 3) Making budget decisions. Mosher (1975) argues that boards have only one task – making finance and budget decisions. Deborah Land (2002), in a meta-analysis of existing literature describes the tasks of school boards parenthetically, writing that boards:

> …appropriate overarching concerns, namely students' academic achievement and policy, not administration; good relations with the superintendent, other agencies, local and state government, and the public, as well as between board members; effective performance in the areas of policy-making, leadership, and budgeting; and adequate evaluation and training/development.

Two themes emerge from this discussion of school board tasks. First, the tasks of school boards, as illustrated by Figure 2.2, range from very specific (i.e. voting on a district budget) to very vague (i.e. monitoring district finances). Second, there is no clear consensus of the tasks of school boards. Asking multiple people what a school board does will likely yield many often-conflicting answers.

The lack of a unified consensus on what school boards actually do presents both a practical and theoretical problem when attempting to research the institution. How can the performance of school boards on whole be measured without first having standards on which to gauge performance? If a clear list of what boards ought to be doing existed measuring if they are doing it, and if they are doing it well, would be fairly straightforward. If there was universal agreement with Mosher (1975) that financial oversight is the sole task of school boards, a board with a clear and balanced budget could be deemed successful, and a board without one unsuccessful. But alas, no consensus exists.

Thus comes the second and more interesting theoretical problem: If no agreement on what boards do exists, how can their existence ever be validated? This theoretical problem lies at the heart of the growing strain of literature declaring that school boards are an obstacle to learning and an obsolete relic of a bygone era (Viteritti, 2009). The line of reasoning is that local control of education had its place in American history, but it

no longer reflects reality, and alternative structures for overseeing the delivery of K-12 education are necessary.

Both the described practical and theoretical problems provide an opportunity to recast the tasks of school boards in the United States. Both the practitioner and academic literature is too focused on solving the problem of how 14,000 complex local governments should go about overseeing the education of American elementary and secondary students. That problem is too large, too local, and too complex be solved with a list of specific tasks, best practices, or model policies. Understanding the place of school boards requires a much simpler and broader starting point.

As mentioned, the role of school boards is presumed to be maximizing the academic performance of district students. Given that role, the universal task for all school boards should be simply defined as overseeing the production of academic output. As illustrated in Figure 2.3, school districts can be viewed as organizations that take raw materials and turn them into profit.

Figure 2.3 – An Organizational Model for School Districts

Raw Materials	→	Organization	→	Profit
(Students)		(School District)		(Academic Outcomes)

The raw materials are students, and all of the problems and attributes that come with them. As will be demonstrated in future chapters, the quality of the students districts receive varies widely across school districts. Many districts receive students from stable family homes and demographic groups that generally correlate with high academic achievement. Other districts receive students mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds and demographic groups generally correlated with low levels of academic

achievement. The optimal operations of a school district will necessarily depend on the type of raw materials that go into it.

The organizations receiving the raw materials are school districts. American school districts also vary widely in organization. Some districts serve tens of thousands of students in hundreds of schools, while others serve less than 100 students in a single schoolhouse. Some provide comprehensive services for special needs students; some send their most needy students to other districts. Districts vary in the way they pay their staffs, the way they spend their limited monetary resources, and in a countless number of other observable and unobservable ways.

Profit in the organizational model for school districts is broadly described as academic output. Though admittedly no perfect way to measure academic output exists, the widespread use of standardized tests within states and a common measurement of four-year high school graduation rates used by the National Center for Education Statistics across states provide rich data from which to gauge and compare the quality of academic output across school districts.

Collectively, the three-step model can be described as an exercise in public administration. After all, education is a public good funded by taxpayers, staffed by public employees, and available free of charge to all American children. Historically scholars have often described the delivery of public education as a unique activity markedly different than the activities performed by other local governments (Mosher, 1975; Land, 2002). Not applying the scholarship and lessons from the operations of other local governments to school districts makes little sense given their significant shared charge and characteristics.

So where do school boards fit into this process? Simply, school boards govern. As previously mentioned school boards oversee the public administration task of producing academic output. There is no single set of specific things they should be doing; theirs is a broad charge of making the best of the raw materials received by the school district. For example, a school board that oversees a district populated by highly motivated students with engaged families might maximize student performance by governing with as light of a touch as possible, seeking only to not pollute quality raw materials. Another district with very challenging students with disengaged families may need to design specific district policies to counteract the negative impact of a disengaged or dysfunctional home environment. This may be something as simple as an extended school day that keeps students in the care of teachers and other school staff for longer parts of the day.

This hypothetical comparison suggests that knowing when to take or not take specific action can be as important a part of governance as the specific actions taken. It follows that the way in which school boards govern, though perhaps less obvious to the naked eye, are more important than any specific set of board created district policies. In the chapters that follow the connection between board governance characteristics and behaviors, like the presence of conflict, cooperation, situational awareness, and academic output, will be explored (Gabris & Davis, 2006; Svara, 1990). The presumptions going into my quantitative analyses is that governance is a process conducted by school boards rather than a set of policies, and that that process impacts academic performance in school districts.

School Boards and Zones of Discretion

The specific connections between school board governance and academic output will be probed in the following chapter. But first, a significant complicating factor not limited to, but especially present in, school board governance must be discussed. As described by Michal Kirst (2008), school boards operate in zones of discretion that constrict the school board governance process. A review of state statutes informs Table 2.1, which contains the author's summary of the level of discretion present in school board's operating in the six states of interest. The areas were chosen based on their importance to the previously discussed organizational model of school districts. Student quality refers to a school board's ability to control who they educate, revenue and personnel refer to the control school boards have over the resources essential to school districts, and assessment refers to the level of control school districts have over the way in which the academic output of school districts is measured.

Table 2.4 – Level of School Board Discretion by Area by State

Area	**Wisconsin**	**Michigan**	**Minnesota**	**Florida**	**Utah**	**Nevada**
Revenue	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Low
Personnel	High	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Assessment	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Student Quality	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Revenue

Revenue refers to the state, local, and federal funding used to finance public school district operations. In all six states education funding is determined through an equalization formula designed to match state funding with an individual school district's capacity to raise local revenue, or a minimum foundation program which provides individual school districts with an amount of funding dependent on the unique characteristics (i.e. level of poverty, number of special needs pupils) of that school

district. The general goal of both minimum foundation and equalization aid formulas is to ensure that longstanding historical disparities in funding between low and high income school districts, famously profiled in Jonathan Kozol's (2012) *Savage Inequalities*, are eliminated.

The elimination of inequitable funding was largely made possible by increases in state support of K-12 education. As documented in Table 2.2, in four of the six states of focus the level of state financial support for K-12 education exceeds local support. All six states have substantial levels of state support, as well as significant levels of federal support. The increased investment by state and federal government coincided, and was often tied to, increased regulation by state and federal governments (Spillane, 1998; Howell, 2005). The result is a smaller discretionary box in which school boards can make decisions regarding revenue generation.

Table 2.5 – Percentage of K-12 Education Revenue by Source, 2008-2009.

Total K-12 Revenue	**Wisconsin**	**Michigan**	**Minnesota**	**Florida**	**Utah**	**Nevada**
State	44.4%	55.7%	65.6%	34.4%	52.6%	30.6%
Local	41.3%	31.2%	25.2%	51.7%	30.8%	56.7%
Federal	12.0%	11.5%	6.0%	10.2%	12.4%	9.8%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

In Wisconsin, every fall the newspapers are peppered with stories about where school boards set their tax levy. The level of attention placed on the school board's action is out of whack with their input in the actual action. In Wisconsin, for example, the setting of the tax levy is, for most districts, an administrative task, not a discretionary one. Since 1992 Wisconsin has had strict local government revenue limits in place that limit the amount of revenue school boards can raise from state and local sources (Kava & Olin, 2013). Every year the state of Wisconsin informs every school district of how

much money they are able to raise (the number is based on enrollment), and how much state aid the state will be sending to the district. The school board is then allowed to set a tax levy that fills the gap between allowable revenue and state aid. A school board can vote to levy less than allowed (which happens roughly 20% of the time), levy the maximum allowable amount (which happens roughly 70% of the time), or vote to go to referendum to exceed their revenue limit (which happens roughly 10% of the time). In other words, Wisconsin school boards more often than not have zero control of their local property tax levy. The other states of interest have somewhat similar systems in place.

Since 1994, Michigan schools have had no control over their local education revenue; the amount of local and state aid to Michigan school districts is determined entirely by state government (CRC, 2010). Minnesota school boards operate under a system similar to Wisconsin, where the legislature set taxing limits in various areas and gives boards the options of levying less than the limit, or going directly to the voters via referendum for permission to exceed the limits.

Florida school boards have slightly more power. The state sets the local education levy but does allow boards to levy additional taxes for operations and capital expenses, but those two levies are also capped. In Nevada, about 80% of total education funding comes from local and state sales tax. There is also a property tax levied for education, but school boards have no control over either, the amounts are set by the state. Finally, Utah, like Florida, allows school boards to levy for specific purposes but places strict caps on the levies.

In general, school boards in my six states of interest are boxed in when it comes to revenue decisions. Florida and Utah do have some controlled discretion to fund

specific programming, but the rest of the states are totally at the mercy of state legislatures and referendum voters.

Personnel

Since the mid 1960s school boards across the country have ceded substantial personnel authority via collectively bargained contracts with labor unions (Fuller & Mitchell, 2006). In each of the six states over 3/4ths of teachers are members of labor unions that collectively bargain with school boards. A review of the *2009-2013 Labor Agreement* between Wisconsin's Racine Unified School District and the Racine Education Association provides specific examples of the issues collectively bargained by teachers unions and school boards (RUSD, 2009).

- Teachers rights to academic freedom;
- Teachers rights to participate in political activity;
- The right to be suspended with pay if accused of child abuse;
- Tenure;
- Grievance procedures;
- Class size;
- Preparation time;
- Class load;
- Use of Educational Assistants;
- Daily start and end times;
- Chaperoning compensation;
- Student discipline;
- Teacher contracts;

- Teacher pay;
- Teacher benefits;
- Procedures for teacher lay-offs;
- Teacher evaluations;
- School calendar;
- Length of school year;
- Parent teacher conferences;
- Lunchroom supervision responsibility;
- Packing days;
- Early retirement provisions;
- Sick leave;
- Leaves of absence;
- Teacher role in developing curriculum; and
- The existence of union bulletin boards.

All of these topics impact the specific manner in which children receive an education, mainly because they all deal with public education's most important employees: Teachers, the front-line bureaucrats that actually teach kids (Lipsky, 2010). Accordingly, policies and decisions related to teachers are the most important tool that school boards have to influence student outcomes. The ability for school boards to hire, strategically place, motivate, reward, and replace teachers is the most important and obvious school board governance function affected by collective bargaining agreements.

Indeed, a national survey of school board members shows that a majority of American school board members think the provisions in collectively bargained contracts

prevent them from dismissing ineffective teachers (Hess & Meeks, 2011). Significant numbers of board members also point to contracts as an obstacle to proper teacher placement and hiring.

The specific states of interest all face some type of general limits on personnel policies. However, there is some variation. In Utah and Nevada, for example, unions are required to be district level entities, and in Utah, cannot be favored above other teacher organizations. In other words, school boards theoretically have more leverage over unions in these states. In Michigan and Minnesota, teachers unions are strongly organized at the state level and not limited in law in the same manner as those in Nevada and Utah.

Wisconsin's collective bargaining landscape looked much like Michigan and Minnesota prior to the passage of Wisconsin 2011 Act 10, which limited collective bargaining for most public employees, including teachers, to base wages (strictly defined as the total pooled amount spent on teacher compensation). Issues like tenure, pay scales, benefit contributions, and the other subjects listed from the teachers contract example can be unilaterally manipulated by school boards in Wisconsin. Meaning, Wisconsin school boards are unique in regards to personnel policies; they have an incredibly high level of discretion.

Evaluation

Perhaps nowhere have school boards ceded more local control than the ways in which they measure student performance. Prior to 1985, the assessment decisions of school districts were almost universally decided by school boards (Archibald & Ford, 2012). Many school boards in Wisconsin, for example, chose not to administer any

standardized tests to their students (Archibald & Ford, 2012). However, the publishing of *A Nation at Risk* is generally agreed to have spurred interest in quantitatively measuring the academic performance of American pupils (Garnder, 1983).

However, it was not until the passage of the 2001 renewal of the Education and Secondary Education Act, popularly known as No Child Left Behind, that federally mandated testing began dictating school board assessment policies. Under No Child Left Behind every student must be tested in reading and math in grades three through eight, and once in high school. Students must also be tested in science at least three times over their K-12 careers. The act did not mandate a specific test, meaning states were able to design or adopt tests at their discretion. However, it did remove any power school boards had over the most visible way in which they evaluate their students.

More recently all six states of interest have been granted No Child Left Behind waivers, which shift many of the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind to the states. However, from the school board's point-of-view districts still have little power over their official student evaluation system. But boards are not completely powerless. None of the six states prohibit the use of additional assessment techniques by school districts. There are examples of boards in all six states using formative assessments that measure student achievement several times throughout a school year, test score growth measures, and alternative assessment indicators like portfolios and graduation rates to measure student outcomes. So, while school boards may have no flexibility regarding their official state tests, they do have discretion to use alternative measures of academic output.

Student Quality

As will be demonstrated by a series of multi-variate regression analyses in chapter four, the strongest predictors of K-12 standardized tests scores in all six states are socio-economic and demographic factors beyond the control of schools. Turning back to the organizational school district model, the lower the quality of the raw materials the lower the likely level of profit. If public school boards could choose the students that they educate, they would logically be expected to obtain higher district level academic outcomes. In theory, all public school boards have no discretion over who attends their school. In practice, some have a greater lack of discretion than others.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, the local public school district enrolls a significantly higher percentage of special needs pupils than schools participating in that city's fairly large private school voucher and charter programs (Wolf et. al., 2012). The discrepancy is primarily due to the requirement that the Milwaukee Public Schools must provide special needs services to pupils. Other school types do not face the same requirement (Wolf et. al., 2012). Naturally, this causes high-needs students to be overrepresented in the traditional public school system. Both Florida and Wisconsin have significant private school voucher programs, and all six states have fairly strong charter school laws, making it more likely that specific sub-groups of students are relegated to traditional public schools that can cavalierly be called schools of last resort.

It also must be noted that many school boards oversee selective admission magnet schools within their districts that offset some of the impact of the sorting that occurs when non-district schooling options exists. However, these specific cases are less important for explaining student performance than demonstrating that public school boards have very little control over the quality of students that attend their district.

Assigning a number of one to three to each entry in Table 2.1 (one representing a low level of discretion, two a medium, and three a high) enables a state-level ranking of the zones of discretion in which school boards operate. Wisconsin and Utah boards have the most discretion, followed by Florida and Nevada, with Michigan and Minnesota facing the most constraints. Another less quantitative way of approaching the issue of discretionary zones is to divide more specific school board activities into three categories:

1) Things they directly control;

2) Things they indirectly control; and

3) Things they do not control.

What school boards can directly control

Arguably the most important thing school boards can control is the hiring and firing of a superintendent (Callahan, 1975). A superintendent is the Chief Executive Officer of a school district and sets the tone of daily operations within the organization (Svara, 1990). Elected school boards approve the search process, the interview process, and ultimately the contract for a superintendent. Boards also have the power to terminate or non-renew a superintendent's contract, making the board relationship with the superintendent its most prominent way of controlling daily district operations.

School boards also have direct power over the nature of state-level required policies. The states of interest, for example, require that districts have a policy to deal with bullying and harassment of students, but it is the board that actually determines the content of the policy.

In addition school boards in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, and Florida have the power to authorize charter schools. Boards in all six states are able to

unilaterally set budget priorities, contract for services, and do an infinite number of activities not specifically banned or required under state and federal law. This includes conducting research on the performance of pupils, administering standardized tests that go beyond what is required in state and federal law, and increasing graduation and/or promotion requirements.

What boards can indirectly control

The things school boards can control only indirectly include those tied to enrollment, and those tied to collective bargaining. As described, if school boards want to spend more, their districts generally need more pupils. Districts obviously can and do take action to maximize their student enrollment. An example might be the creation of specialty offerings such as Montessori schools. More broadly, districts may simply try their best to respond to parental demands to keep enrollment numbers strong.

What Boards Cannot Control

American school boards generally must comply with a long list of state and federal mandates over which they have no control. Not the least of which is the aforementioned accountability system mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Law. However accountability mandates only scratch the surface. School districts must follow state guidelines regarding their minimal instruction time, the way in which medication is administered at the school level, the standards that must be met by subject area, and any number of specific curricular content requirements.

The discussion of discretionary zones is not meant to give school boards excuses for poor district performance, but rather to provide context for the chapters that follow. Jennifer Hochschild (2005) discusses the topic of school board expectations and

concludes that no real understanding of what boards can or cannot do exists, making critiques of the institution misguided, or, at the very least pre-mature. As will be discussed in the next chapter, school boards do have immense power to influence academic achievement in their district. But, as illustrated above, the context in which they operate must be taken into account when evaluating their performance.

More important for the validity of this study, the differences between the discretionary zones of school boards in different states provide the framework for fruitful comparative analyses. Consider, for example, the differences between personnel polices in Wisconsin and Minnesota. If Minnesota and Wisconsin board members generally feel they have similar levels of control over their staffing policies, the upheaval caused by Wisconsin's collective bargaining reforms should be seriously questioned. Similarly, if the slightly more permissive revenue generating capacity of school boards in Utah and Nevada can be linked to better overall board governance, it may mean loosening revenue caps in other states is wise policy. At the very least, this exercise establishes that school boards operate in a constricted, but not uniformly so, environment. Given this, future chapters must account for different discretionary zones when making general conclusions.

Conclusions

The preceding chapter proposes a new way of understanding the roles, tasks, and capabilities of American school boards. Specifically, I argue that existing analyses of school board performance focus on minute non-transferable details rather than the commonalities that exist between all school boards. Most importantly, this chapter defines the role of the American school board as maximizing student achievement

outcomes. This role is defined as such out of necessity. Consider, other administrative arrangements including mayoral control, decentralized voucher and charters systems, and state takeovers of school districts adequately demonstrate that other non-democratic intuitions are capable of executing the administrative task of delivering a publicly funded education. In fact, many have argued that these alternative structures have done more than simply demonstrate *they can* deliver public education, but that *they can deliver it more efficiently than school boards* (Viteritti, 2009; Wong et. al., 2007; Wong & Shen, 2003). If this is true, why must school boards survive?

Well, for one, to serve the nearly 50 million students attending district run schools. Changing the administrative structure by which the vast majority of American students receive an education might make sense if improved outcomes were promised, but the existing research on alternative structures like mayoral control, vouchers, and charter schools is underwhelming. Under very specific circumstances all three alternative have shown the ability to create marginal improvements in outcomes, but nothing nearly substantial enough to offset the upheaval caused by eliminating 14,000 bastions of local democracy.

Most importantly, there is convincing evidence that school boards can better fulfill the role of maximizing student performance through improved governance (Delagardelle, 2008). This chapter argues part of fulfilling the potential of school board governance is understanding that the tasks of school boards sit on a specific to broad continuum, and will and should vary across different school boards. Together, the tasks performed by boards can be described as a single task of governance; or, the public administration of a school district.

This chapter also establishes a simple organizational school district model which explains the process which school boards oversee; that of taking raw materials (students) and turning them into measurable profit (academic output). Finally, I establish that school districts operate within different discretionary zones based on the state and federal policy environments in which they operate, thus creating a framework for comparative analyses.

The next chapter will go into the black box of school board governance in order to demystify the link between school board governance and academic outcomes. Chapters four through seven are data driven, giving a deep understanding of the states of interest, and testing of the formal hypotheses listed in chapter one. Chapter eight looks at the special case of public charter schools, providing greater understanding of one of the alternative structures discussed in this chapter.

Chapter III.
How School Board Governance Impacts District Performance: A Theoretical Model

The connection between governance and organizational performance is not a common sense connection. Boards in the for-profit, non-profit, and government sectors can all have varying degrees of engagement with the organization they are charged with overseeing. The connection between school board governance and school district outcomes is arguably even less inherent given the limitations on school board action, and the lack of a clear set of specific tasks, as explained in the preceding chapter. But even with the discussed limitations there is good reason to think school boards can and do impact student outcomes. No, school board members do not directly educate students, but they do govern the entire process, and do influence the results of this process. The following chapter will explain exactly how.

Specifically, this chapter will argue that school board governance activities can be split up in to two different groups. One, the things school boards must do to create the necessary pre-conditions for their districts to deliver a quality education; or to borrow from Frederick Herzberg, hygiene factors (Herzberg et. al., 1993). And two, the activities within the black box of governance that actually determine the quality of education provided by a school district. The hygiene factors generally can be directly manipulated by school board action. The inside the black box activities often cannot, and, as important, the actions necessary to manipulate them indirectly are situation dependent.

This chapter will be organized as follows:

- First, a discussion of what is meant by the term governance;

- Second, a review of the limited scholarship demonstrating the linkages connecting school board governance and academic output;
- Three, a review and discussion of hygiene factors in school districts;
- Fourth, a look at situation dependent black box factors in school districts; and
- Fifth, a review of how small group dynamics can influence the black box factors.

By the end of the chapter the reader should have a clear understanding of why school board governance can be expected to impact academic achievement, and how the forthcoming quantitative models will allow for an evaluation of how school boards are in fact, influencing academic outcomes.

What is Governance?

The role of governance in any organization can easily be taken for granted. After all, employees are the ones doing the daily business of an organization, and managers are the ones directly responsible for overseeing employees. When an organization fails to produce results it is the employees or management that most often face the blame. Boards of directors usually only receive attention in cases of malfeasance, not cases of underperformance.

Implicit in this reality is the idea that boards of directors serve a guarantor function. Increasingly, however, the historic role of governance is being challenged. John Carver, for example, argues in *Boards that Make a Difference* that governing boards can increase organizational performance by focusing on setting broad policy goals, creating and adhering to strict policies on how the board operates, placing clear limits on executive authority, not communicating directly with staff, establishing clear expectations for staff, and holding staff accountable for performance (Carver, 2006).

Though Carver's ideas have had mixed results when actually implemented, his policy governance model did increase mainstream acceptance of the idea that governing boards can increase organizational performance.

But what exactly is governance? How does a board go about improving the performance of an organization? Political Scientist James Svara offers a model for understanding governance by defining a process consisting of four dimensions (Svara, 1990). The first three dimensions; mission, policy, and administration, are the responsibility of a governing board. The fourth dimension, management, is influenced by the governing board but is not their direct responsibility. Accordingly, governance can be described as the process by which a governing board determines an organization's mission, policies, and administration activities.

Mission

Mission is the reason an organization exists. The model presented in chapter two suggests the role of school boards, the primary reason they exist, is to maximize academic output. Governing boards in general determine their organization's mission by outlining its primary goals. Failing to do so is a primary reason that boards fail (Smoley Jr, 1999).

Policy

Broadly, policy is the tools and methods a board uses to execute its mission. A major example of a policy initiative in the Svara framework is the budgeting process. The way a board allocates limited funds can advance or inhibit the district's mission. Another example is the creation of specific programming such as professional

development for employees. An obvious wat that boards can fail in executing their mission is by making policy decisions that do not align with their primary goals.

Administration

Administration is the way boards go about implementing their policies. For example, say a school board decides to create a new classroom for disruptive students. The policy idea is in place and budgeted, but someone needs to decide where the classroom is placed, what constitutes a disruptive student, and the process by which a student is actually moved into the classroom. All of these tasks are part of administration.

Management

Management is the fourth element of the governmental process and the only one beyond the direct control of a governing board. Once a board creates and implements a program aligned to its mission someone needs to oversee the day-to-day execution of the program, and give feedback to the board as to its success. Management in a school district is the job of superintendents, principals, teachers, and other administrative staff.

Drawing from Svara, a simple satisfying definition of governance is:

> *The ways in which a board collectively determines, and oversees the execution of, an organization's mission.*

A less satisfying, circular, but perhaps more realistic definition of governance is: *The things boards do.* The former definition assumes a certain level of board competence, the latter definition encompasses everything a board does or does not do. In other words, a derelict board, under the first definition, might be described as one that is not governing at all. Under the second definition, a derelict boards would be one that is

governing poorly. For the purposes of this study the latter definition of governance will be used.

Why? Under the organizational school district model presented in chapter two school boards seek to maximize the academic output of the raw materials, or students, their organization receives. If a school district receives high quality students, maximizing their output may be as simple as staying out of the way. In other words, a board may seek to do very little in order to maintain a quality status quo. This absence of action, if academic output is maximized, is effective school board governance.

The preceding discussion of governance was necessarily abstract. It provides a general idea of what governance is, and how it interacts with the employees actually executing the mission of an organization. The next section will specifically explain why school board governance can impact school district academic outcomes.

The Importance of School Board Governance

The practitioner literature on school board governance offers no small number of prescriptions for improved governance, taking for granted that governance is important. The National School Boards Association (NSBA), for example, publishes a framework consisting of eight different areas where boards are advised to focus their work. The *Key Work of School Boards,* as the NSBA dubs them, are not research based, but do offer board members an overview of how successful school boards should be approaching their task (Gemberling et. al., 2000). The eight keys along with descriptive questions are:

1. Vision – Where does the board want the district to go?
2. Standards – Against what should student performance be measured?

3. Assessment – How should performance against agreed upon standards be measured?
4. Accountability – Who does the board hold responsible for student outcomes, and how?
5. Alignment – Are limited resources allocated in ways that aid achievement?
6. Climate and Culture – Is everything the district does focused on meeting its vision?
7. Collaboration and Community Engagement – Who are the outside stakeholders and how does the district interact with them?
8. Continuous Improvement – Does the board make informed decisions to keep outcomes moving in the right direction.

A hypothetical exercise that digs deeper into these eight areas provides some insight into how addressing them might impact academic achievement.

Vision

A passive board may point to a vague long-standing strategic plan as evidence that they are executing a clear vision. However, board turnover and changing academic realities demand continuous attention be paid to the district's vision. An active board may engage in formal strategic planning after each election, work with an outside consultant to aid in determining vision, and work to obtain community buy-in of their stated vision.

Standards

A passive board will merely use state and federal standards without discussion. An active board will determine how existing standards align with their long-term vision, and

consider academic standards that go beyond existing standards and/or are more specifically tailored to the needs of their students.

Assessment

Assessment is another area boards can choose to ignore by assuming state and federal testing mandates are serving their students well. Many districts across the country, however, have adopted value-added assessment models and mid-year benchmark testing to use assessment as a tool for informing classroom instruction. An action-oriented board will at the very least explore a variety of assessment strategies that serve their ultimate aims.

Accountability

Again, a passive board may accept that state and federal accountability policy is sufficient for their students' needs. The wide range of performance in districts, as will be illustrated in the next chapter, however, demonstrates that the state and federal accountability framework does not guarantee positive outcomes. An active board will fully engage the issue of accountability by setting clear goals for students, schools, principals, and teachers, and take appropriate actions when goals are not realized.

Alignment

A passive board will take any additional revenue and simply fund every school district department at a slightly higher rate than the previous year. An active board will understand exactly where each dollar is going, evaluate both the usefulness and efficiency of each department as it relates to executing its vision, and annually realign resources based its evaluations.

Climate and Culture

A school board could easily examine quantitative data on police calls to schools, or expulsions and suspensions and conclude that their schools are safe and orderly. An active board would go deeper and engage parents, students, and staff to determine how welcoming their schools actually are. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, for example, creates model school climate surveys to aid districts interested in understanding how stakeholders view their schools. A high-functioning board would go even further and work to build and improve school cultures through formal engagement with teachers and principals.

Collaboration and Community Engagement

A passive school board may view school board elections and/or annual meetings as the sole necessary forms of community engagement. An active board would offer open houses for parents and non-parents alike, have a presence at community events, and seek partners in the business and non-profit communities with a shared interest in K-12 education.

Continuous Improvement

A passive board finds the most recent piece of positive achievement data and uses it to argue that its schools are moving in the right direction. An active board would call attention to indicators that show the district could further improve student outcomes. More importantly, an engaged board would use information not to defend or criticize the district, but to inform personnel and policy decisions.

The preceding discussion is merely hypothetical and of little import absent evidence that school boards can influence academic achievement. But, such evidence has relatively recently come to light. The Iowa School Board Foundation's Lighthouse

Inquiry was the first major study showing that school board governance in particular has the capacity to influence student outcomes (Rice, et al., 2000; Delagardelle, 2008). The inquiry began in 1998 with ethnographic case studies of school districts in southern states with similar demographics but vastly different levels of student performance. The case studies revealed that higher-achieving districts demonstrated common governance behaviors that contrasted with governance behavior in low-achieving districts. For example, board members in generally high achieving districts did not make excuses for low achieving students. Board members in generally low-achieving districts consistently blamed outside forces such as poverty and the poaching of good students by private schools. In high achieving districts both school leaders and school board members expressed common goals and unity of purpose. Low achieving districts did not.

Overall, high achieving districts were also more likely to have in place what the project researchers called conditions for productive change:

1. Connections across the system;
2. Knowing what it takes to change achievement;
3. Workplace support;
4. Professional development;
5. A balance between district wide direction and building-level autonomy;
6. A strong community connection; and
7. Distributed leadership.

The Lighthouse Inquiry concluded that boards can help in establishing the processes that create conditions for productive change, which in turn impact the teaching and learning environment throughout the school district, and, in turn, impact the learning

of students in schools. In other words, the way in which school boards govern can impact student outcomes.

The finding of the Lighthouse Inquiry represent a significant pivot point in school board governance research; as mentioned it was the first direct evidence presented that school boards influence academic achievement. The Inquiry's explanation for exactly why boards influence achievement however, remains problematic for two reasons. The first is practical; the existence of so many linkages between governance and outcomes, as illustrated in figure 3.1, makes the process of measuring or manipulating the effectiveness of school board governance all but impossible.

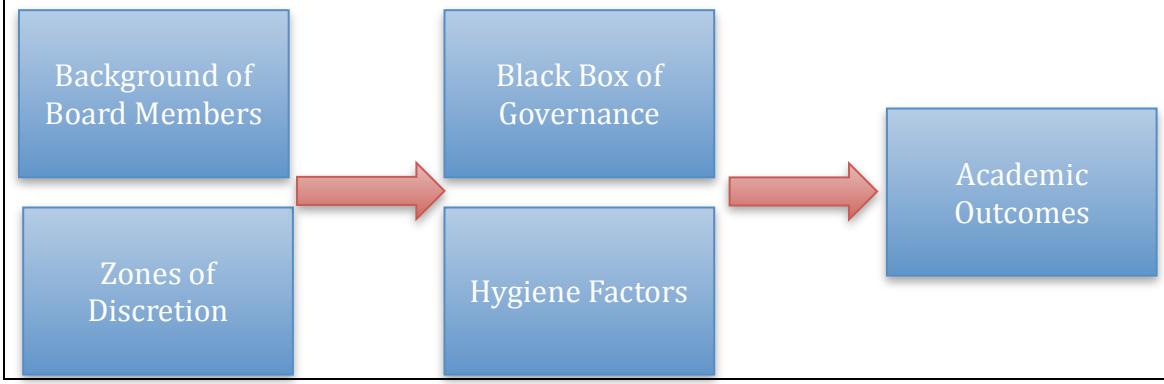
Figure 3.1 – Key Linkages between School Boards and Students Learning (Delagardelle, 2008)
Knowledge, Skills, Beliefs of Board Members → Governance Policies, Priorities, Decisions, & Actions → District & School Culture (Conditions of practice that enable continuous improvement and organizational success) → Classroom Instruction and Student Engagement in the Learning Process → Student Learning Outcomes

The second problem with the Lighthouse linkages is more substantive. The linear linkages illogically detach school board governance from the activities that actually occur in the classroom, and problematically suggest that all school boards go about governing in roughly the same way. The multitude of governance models used in non-profit and corporate boards, the many examples of different governing approaches producing similar positive outcomes, and the different discretionary zones in which school boards operate give cause to question the model in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.2 illustrates a simpler, more vague, yet more accurate, inclusive and substantively satisfying model of the linkages between school board governance and academic performance. Like the Lighthouse model, the black box model begins with the

background characteristics of school board members. There is good reason to suspect that school board members do not enter the action of governance with a blank slate. Deckman (2007), for example, finds basic differences in the reasons men and women run for school board. Melissa Marschall (2005) finds that minority representation on school boards influence the level of satisfaction minority parents have with their schools. Hess & Meeks (2010) find broad ideological diversity across American school boards, and Flinchbaugh (1993) finds that the operations of a school board reflect the qualities of their members. Clearly, what board members believe and what they have a proclivity to do influence what they actually do. Similarly, the policy environment in which they operate logically influences their governance behavior. For example, a school board member in Michigan, where the board has no say in setting their local tax levy, cannot work to change their local tax levy.

Figure 3.2 – Black Box Model of School Board Governance



Briefly establishing that the backgrounds of school board members is relevant leads first to the relatively simple discussion of hygiene factors, and then to the far more difficult and important question: What is in the black box?

School District Hygiene Factors

The concept of hygiene factors is borrowed from Frederick Herzberg. Herzberg was a member of the human relations school of organizational theory. Members of the school, among other things, believe worker satisfaction is a key component in increased job performance (Herzberg, et. al., 1993). In his book, *The Motivation to Work,* Herzberg concludes that workplace satisfaction and dissatisfaction are two distinct concepts. In other words, the opposite of satisfaction is not dissatisfaction, but rather a lack of satisfaction. Motivation-Hygiene theory, as Herzberg deemed it, explains hygiene factors, including things like work conditions and employee supervision polices, as those factors that when properly manipulated by management at best eliminate dissatisfaction.

I adapt this basic concept to school board governance by arguing that there exists a set of basic school board responsibilities that are necessary functions of boards, but do not actually directly influence the academic outcomes of children. Examples of this include facilities, social services such as providing meals for low-income pupils, and even total levels of spending. All of these things are tasks school boards must do, but no matter how well they execute them the maximum impact will not increase student performance.

A quantitative illustration using pooled data from the six states of interest helps illustrate the lack of connection between a prominent hygiene factor - per-pupil revenue - and performance.

Hypothesis

Districts with higher levels of total revenue have higher graduation rates

Data

Descriptive data for the variables in Figure 3.3 are from a pooled data set consisting of information from the National Center for Education Statistics. The independent variable, revenue per-student, is the total amount of state, local, and federal funding per-pupil school districts received in 2008-09. The dependent variable, graduation rates, is a common indicator of the percentage of freshmen entering a high school that graduated four years later in 2008-09.

The other variables listed in table 3.1 are control variables generally agreed to be non-school influences on academic performance (Hanushek, 1997). This includes the percentage of total district enrollment that is a member of a minority group, the percentage of total district enrollment that is eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch price program (a means-tested program that indicates the percentage of a district with household incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level), the percentage of students eligible for special needs services by virtue of having an individual education plan, the district-wide student to teacher ratio, and the amount of funding spent on district employee salaries per-pupil.

Table 3.1 – Education Variables for All School Districts in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Utah, Florida, and Nevada - 2009

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Graduation Rate	1312	85.3	12.5
Total Revenue Per-Student	1435	11836.2	3653.3
Percent Minority	1432	16.9	18.7
Percent Low-Income	1432	41.5	17.5
Percent Special Needs	1432	14.1	4.0
Student-Teacher Ratio	1432	15.9	3.17
Salary Per-Student	1435	5642	1221.1

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Results and Discussion

The results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model are presented in table 3.2. Basic regression diagnostics including tests for multi-colinearity and heteroskedasticity were conducted. A Breusch-Pagan did find significant evidence of heteroskedasticity, however a robust regression model with the same variables did not yield substantively different findings. As can been seen the predictive model is fairly strong with an adjusted R-square statistic of .432, and the focal variable, revenue per-student, is not statistically significant. The hypothesis can be rejected.

Meaning, the amount of revenue received per-pupil by a school board is not related to a district's graduation rate. In other words, though school boards do serve the necessary function of receiving revenue from state and federal governments as well as local taxpayers, it is not a function that relates directly to academic performance as measured by four-year graduation rates. Even if school boards had the power to manipulate revenue streams (as they do somewhat in Utah and Florida), it should not be expected that that manipulation would materially impact academic outcomes.

Hence, the collection and distribution of revenue is a hygiene factor for which school boards are responsible. The background characteristics of board members will certainly influence how school boards deal with these factors (for example a fiscal conservative may seek to minimize spending), but these factors only influence outcomes in that they must be addressed.

Table 3.2 – OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Graduation Rates

	Graduation Rates	
VARIABLES	Coefficient	SE
Total Revenue Per-Student	.000	.000
Percent Minority	-14.280***	1.729
Percent Low-Income	-34.364***	1.813
Percent Special Needs	-18.788*	8.636

Student-Teacher Ratio	-.400**	.118
Salary Per-Student	.000	.000
Constant	107.569	3.797
Adjusted R2	.432	
Observations	1308	

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Inside the Black Box of Governance

The simplest explanation of what goes on inside the black box of governance is the setting of school and district culture. The culture of an organization in general has been described as the values and norms that guide its operations. School districts and the individual schools within it specifically have been described as reflections of the policies enacted by the school board (Flinchbaugh, 1993; Schein, 1987). More directly, the setting of district policies that build high achieving school cultures should result in high academic success. It is a straightforward concept that is beset by a major problem. There is no single way to set a successful district culture, the steps for doing so are situation dependent and only become clear when academic output is measured. Broadly, what goes on inside the black box of governance can be described as the setting of expectations, and the manipulation of factors to meet those expectations.

Though the broad concept is vague, the actual processes that occur within the black box of governance are specific. The first major process is the setting of expectations and the means by which to measure them. As clearly demonstrated in the practitioner and academic school board literature, a board most have a vision for where it wants its district to go before it can go about the task of moving it there (Flinchbaugh, 1993; Smoley, 1999; Gemberling et. al., 2000; Hochschild, 2005; Callahan, 1975; Delagardelle, 2008).

Second, a district must have a clear way to measure progress towards its vision. For example, if a board seeks to increase the number of its pupils that are college ready, it would likely use ACT or SAT scores as indicators of progress towards that mission. In contrast, if a board seeks to bring struggling students up to grade level, student growth scores would be one way to measure progress.

It is important to differentiate between the role of a school board, previously defined as maximizing student outcomes, and the vision of an organization, which is a situation dependent goal or expectation of where a district is going. The vision of a board is an operational concept, or, a way to go about maximizing student academic output. Measuring progress towards a vision is a tool deployed by districts to better realize and tweak approaches to better work towards realization of that vision. Measuring whether and explaining why a board is fulfilling its role is not an operational concept, it is an outside evaluation process reliant on student test scores and other academic indicators such as graduation rates.

The second major action inside the black box is the setting of situation dependent district-wide policies in the topic areas known to impact academic achievement. Though not an exhaustive list, there are numerous areas where scholarly research shows district wide policies can impact overall academic output.

Teacher Quality

Perhaps the most obvious factor influencing student learning in a classroom is the quality of the teacher. Chetty et. al. (2011) reviewed two decades worth of data linking outcomes to teacher quality in an urban school district and found that a highly qualified teacher can lead to significant test score gains, as well as significantly better lifetime

earnings for students. The challenge a school district faces is how to go about maximizing teacher quality. Research included in the National Center for Education Statistics Institute of Education Sciences' *What Works Clearinghouse* provides many examples of how a school board might go about this, from introducing incentive plans, to improved mentoring (Winters et. al., 2012; Glazerman & Seifullah, 2012). However, both the policy environments of school boards as well as the current level of teacher quality will dictate what a school board should do. Actually improving teacher quality in a specific district requires a school board policy that fits with the unique needs of that district.

Curriculum and Subject Time

What is taught obviously matters as well. School boards, though checked by state requirements, do have plenty of leeway in deciding what textbooks and curricula are used in their district. School boards also have the power to emphasize, above the amounts required by state laws, instruction in specific subject areas of need. There exists no shortage of academic research on the best way to teach core subjects like math and reading to specific groups and sub-groups of pupils. School boards have great power to influence academic outcomes simply be choosing what, how long, and in what manner specific subjects are taught.

Discipline

How should a school district deal with behavior problems? Fabiano et. al. (2010) find that the use of a daily behavior report card for problem elementary pupils significantly improved behavior. Still other studies show that zero tolerance policies that remove troubled students from the classroom are favored by many school districts (Skiba

& Peterson, 2000). The approach a board takes will likely be guided by the extent of its discipline issues, and the community's values. What is clear is that school boards face a situation dependent choice.

Student Specific Interventions

What should a school district do with individual students who are not responding to the regular curriculum? Some school boards create alternative schools, other turn to hybrid education approaches that allow self-guided online learning, still others use federal funds to pay for one-on-one instruction for certain pupils (Christensen et. al., 2008). Whether a school district uses one or more of these approaches, whether they delegate the decisions to principals, or whether it forgoes individual interventions are all board level decisions that will impact the educational quality of the school district.

The preceding exercise was meant to show that school boards must make a multitude of choices in order to answer the many questions that relate directly to classroom instruction, yet have no single best answer. There are countless other governance decisions that school boards must make inside that black box that are situation dependent; what will work and/or be accepted by staff and students in one school district may be rejected and not work in another district. It follows that the decisions made inside the black box of governance need not just be made. They must be made correctly (Or, at least as correctly as possible).

How can a board ensure the correct governance decisions are made? This question sets up the final section of this chapter, which focuses on how school boards go about making governance decisions, and how they can go about maximizing the positive academic impact of those governance decisions.

The Role of Small Group Dynamics In School Board Governance

In its simplest form a school board is nothing more than a group people that regularly gather to make decisions. The process by which they make decisions is dictated in part by parliamentary rules and the structure of their boards, but much of the way in which a school board makes decisions is dependent on the different personalities, formal and informal roles, goals, biases, ambitions, conflicts and other attributes present in board members' group interactions. Given the discussion in the previous section of the situation dependent nature of school board governance decisions that affect academic outcomes, the small group dynamics present in a school board should be expected to dictate the quality of key governance decision. Simply, a high functioning group is more likely to make good constructive decisions, and a low-functioning group is more likely to make poor destructive decisions. Accordingly, understanding the way in which school board members make decisions is as important as the specific decisions they make. Later chapters of this study present detailed data culled from surveys of school board members in the six states of interest, but first a basic understanding of school group dynamics is necessary.

John Carver (1997) demonstrates that there are key recognizable differences between high-functioning and low-functioning small groups serving on boards. Carver identifies over-dependence on organizational staff, unclear executive authority, the failure to respond appropriately to problems, and the overuse of committees as clear signals that a board is dysfunctional. Public Administration professor and local government consultant Gerald T. Gabris (2006) sheds greater light into how the interactions of government board members can inhibit or enhance organizational

performance. Gabris developed a diagnostic chart used to evaluate the level of dysfunction on a local government board. He finds that dysfunctional boards are not driven by consensus, have a short term planning horizon, lack shared values, conflict with staff, hold stressful meetings, lack trust, and pursue vague goals. High functioning boards exhibit exactly the opposite traits, they:

- Think long term;
- Share common goals and values;
- Get along with staff and the CEO;
- Have collegial relations with other board members;
- Trust other board members; and
- Engage in planning.

Other scholars identify many of the counter-productive traps that small-groups fall into when interacting. Paul 't Hart (1994), for example, argues that the positive attribute of cohesiveness among a small government group can degrade into a destructive state of groupthink, leading to policy failure. The typical signs of groupthink in government are a sense of moral superiority, a devaluing of the seriousness or legitimacy of opposing views, creation and demonization of an identifiable out-group, and a closed circle of communication. A possible consequence of groupthink on a school board would be a lack of situational awareness leading to the adoption of favored policies that are in fact a poor fit with the needs of a school district.

Less specific than groupthink but just as important a concept in small group dynamics is conflict. Conflict in any small group is natural and can actually be a constructive way for a group to relieve tension (Coser, 1956). However, conflict can also

manifest in destructive ways, becoming so entrenched that it prevents basic board activities (Deutsch, 1973). Karen Jehn (1997) provides a helpful framework in which to study small group conflict. Her qualitative work identifies three specific types of conflict in small groups.

The first, relationship conflict, refers to conflict that occurs because individual board members simply do not get along. An expected consequence of relationship conflict is a lack of productivity caused by time and energy wasted on issues irrelevant to board business. In addition, personal conflict between board members is likely to raise the stress level in a board meeting, an indicator of a low-functioning group.

The second type of conflict identified by Jehn is task conflict. A hypothetical example of task conflict on a school board is disagreement over the proper way to assess teacher quality. Unlike relationship conflict, task conflict can theoretically be productive as it presumably leads to an eventual resolution. However, the resolution of task conflict without board unity could in fact be a sign of a dysfunctional board (Smoley Jr, 1999).

The third type of conflict identified by Jehn is process conflict. This is conflict regarding the way in which a small group conducts its business. On a school board, process conflict might surface as a disagreement over which committee is to first evaluate a potential policy change, or whether a public hearing is necessary prior to passage of a major policy change.

Another dynamic present in small groups is cooperation. Kimberly Nelson and Karl Nollenberger (2011) find that the structure of local government boards, including the presence of citywide seats, can actually increase the level of cooperation on a board. Many of the attributes of a high functioning board relate directly to the presence of a

high-level of cooperation, meaning the ability for the structure of boards to increase this positive attribute is a significant finding.

The survey developed and deployed for this study focuses on the concepts of small group dynamics in order to test the connection between the way in which a governing board goes about its activities, and the overall performance of the organization. It also asks specific questions regarding the NSBA's eight key works of school board governance to determine if these are the factors that boards should in fact be focusing on to improve student achievement. There is substantial overlap between the qualities of high-functioning small groups, listed previously in this section, and the NSBA's keys, giving reasons to think that school boards adhering to the eight keys are also seeing academic benefit in their districts.

Conclusion

The preceding chapter establishes a basis for the testing of specific hypotheses on the relationship between school board governance and academic outcomes in school districts in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Florida, Utah, and Nevada. First, I reviewed existing scholarly research on public-sector governance to come up with a simple working definition of governance: The things boards do. The discussion is critical in that it establishes a basic all-encompassing starting point from which to approach more specific study of school boards.

Second, the chapter reviewed the Lighthouse Inquiry, the first academic study to provide direct evidence that school board governance can and does impact the academic outcomes of a school district. I also reviewed the dominant best practice recommendations used by American school boards, and critiqued the Lighthouse Inquiry

model identifying the linkages between school board governance and academic output as too specific and narrow to explain the diversity of ways in which school boards can govern successfully. I propose an alternative model that considers the backgrounds of board members, but divides the actual governance activities into two categories, hygiene factors, and black box factors.

Third, I explain what is meant by hygiene factors, as well as the origins of the concept within the human relations school of Public Administration. Hygiene factors in the proposed model are those that are necessary for the operations of school districts, but cannot be manipulated in order to improve academic outcomes. School boards are necessarily responsible for these factors. As an example I presented the results of a multi-variate regression analysis testing the hypothesis that per-pupil revenue positively impacts graduation rates in the six states of interest. The lack of a relationship confirms that funding activities, though a responsibility of school boards, should not be expected to improve graduation rates.

Fourth, I explain what is contained in the black box of school board governance. Plainly, the vast array of situation dependent decisions made by school boards that impact the academic outcomes of school districts fit into this category. Reviewing research in the areas of teacher quality, discipline, curriculum, assessment, and student-level intervention reveals that many board actions can improve academic outcomes, however it is knowing when to make the right decision that ultimately leads to improved academic outcomes.

The final section of Chapter Three uses the discussion of black box governance factors as a foundation from which to propose that the dynamics of small groups plays a

role in whether school boards will make good decisions within the black box. Research on small group dynamics in non-profit and other government boards is reviewed to demonstrate what exactly is meant by small group dynamics.

The following chapters will build off of the mostly theoretical construct presented thus far by first reviewing a large amount of academic performance and demographic data on school districts in the six states of interest, and then using survey responses of board members to test the specific hypotheses listed in Chapter one. The review of existing school board research in Chapter one, the establishment of the existence of discretionary zones in which school boards operate in Chapter two, and the presenting of the theoretical justifications for testing the extent to which school board governance affects school district outcomes lead into the main topic of Chapter four: The data.

Chapter IV.
Characteristics of and Comparisons Between Education Systems in Florida, Nevada, Utah, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin

The preceding chapter introduces a theoretical model that gives plausible reason to suspect that school board governance is a key determinant of school district academic outcomes. This chapter will use archival data to strengthen the case for looking closer at school board member behavior by testing two hypotheses that justify the two-group comparative analyses method deployed in this study:

Hypothesis 1: There are significant differences in the make-up of school districts in the two groups of states.

Hypothesis 2: The major predictors of academic outcomes are similar across the six states of interest.

Both of the hypotheses are tested using archival data, which are described in detail, thereby presenting a detailed portrait of the education systems in all six states. More important, establishing that school districts in the two groups of states are substantially different both in structure and student population, yet share common predictors of academic performance, supports the use of the situation dependent decision making model of school board governance described in Chapter three. Why? Variations in achievement cannot plausibly be explained away by state-to-state differences, allowing the actions collectively known as governance to be tested as the source for variation in achievement.

The first hypothesis is tested using a series of difference of means tests that establish the various differences between the school districts in the two groups of states that serve as the basis for the comparative case-study analysis. In total, there are 1,437

school districts in the six states of interest: 125 in Florida, Nevada, and Utah, and 1,312 in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Group-to-Group Differences

The following section is guided by the research question: Are there substantial differences in the district level education systems in the two groups of states? I hypothesize that there are substantial differences. All the data used in the following difference of means tests is archival, and publicly available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) common core database (USDOE, 2012). The variables are divided into four categories, and explained in the subsections below.

Structural Variables

The structural variables are those that deal with the size and scope of school districts. The variables are:

- Enrollment – The number of students enrolled in the school district in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Number of schools – The number of schools serving students in each school district in the 2010-11 school year;
- Percentage of charter schools – The number of schools authorized by and operating in the district divided by the total number of schools in the district in the 2010-2011 school year; and
- Student teacher ratio – Total district enrollment divided by the number of district teachers in the 2010-2011 school year.

Demographic Variables

The demographic variables consist of the student racial, socioeconomic, and gender make-up of students served by, and the community wealth of residents living in, a school district. The variables are:

- Percent male – The total percentage of district students that are male in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Percent Black – The total percentage of district students that are African-American in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Percent White – The total percentage of district students that are white in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Percent Hispanic – The total percentage of district students that are Hispanic in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Percent non-White – The total percentage of district students that are minority in the 2010-2011 school year;
- Percent eligible for federal free or reduced price lunch – The total percentage of district students that qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program in the 2010-2011 school year. Eligibility is a proxy for low-income because program eligibility is limited to students from families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level;
- Percent English Language Learners (ELL) - The total percentage of district students "who were not born in the United States or whose native languages are languages other than English" in the 2010-2011 school year (USDOE, 2012);
- Percent with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) – The total percentage of district students with IEPs in the 2010-2011 school year. Students with special

needs are given IEPs, hence the variables serves as a proxy for often higher cost special needs pupils; and

- Per-capita community income – Data from the 2000 United States census on the average per-capita income of households served by the school district.

Fiscal Variables

The fiscal variables all relate to the amount of public revenue received by the school district from various sources. The variables are:

- Revenue per-student – The total amount of public revenues received by the school district in 2008-2009 divided by the district's student enrollment;
- Local revenue per-student - The total amount of local public revenues received by the school district in 2008-2009 divided by the district's student enrollment. Local revenues are generally from local property, sales, and excise taxes;
- State revenue per-student - The total amount of state revenues received by the school district in 2008-2009 divided by the district's student enrollment. State revenues are generally those sent to the school district through the state's education funding formula, and through program-specific categorical aid allocations; and
- Federal revenue per-student - The total amount of public federal revenues received by the school district in 2008-2009 divided by the district's student enrollment. Federal revenues generally come to the district in the form of Title funds for low-income pupils, funding for special needs pupils through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or general revenues sent through federal stimulus programs.

Performance Variables

Though students in different state are not required to take the same standardized tests, they do report two common variables that relate to performance. These variables give a common, albeit imperfect, indicator of district level performance. These variables are:

- Drop-out rate – Drop-out rate is defined by the NCES as: "the percentage of public school students who were enrolled in grades 9–12 at some point during the 2008–09 school year, but were not enrolled in school in October 2009 and had not earned a high school diploma or completed a state- or district-approved education program" (Chapman et. al, 2011, p. 7); and
- Graduation rate – The number of students who graduated high school in the district in 2008-2009 divided by the number of students who started their freshman year four years prior.

The variables from the NCES have some obvious strengths, and one significant weakness. The strengths are that the information is readily available, comparable across states and districts due to common reporting requirements, and incredibly rich and detailed. The weakness is that fiscal, demographic, and performance data often come from different years. Accordingly, a necessary assumption for the validity of this analysis is stability, meaning, there are not large year-to-year swings in the demographics, performance, and fiscal characteristics of school districts. Such an assumption is reasonable. A simple difference of mean-test, for example, finds that total student enrollment in school districts in the six states of interest did not significantly change from 2009-2010 to 2010-2011. The finding is logical given the general stability

of U.S. housing patterns over time (Cashin, 2004). In addition, the size of the dataset ensures that wild swings in any individual district level data will not significantly alter the overcall sample. Nonetheless, the difference in years is a weakness and the following results should be interpreted knowing its existence.

Results of Difference of Means Tests

The five tables below show the results of a series of two-group means tests between the two groups of states. Group One is comprised of Florida, Nevada, and Utah, while Group Two is comprised of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In all of the tables one to three stars are placed next to the mean of the variable in the group determined to be significantly larger than the mean of other group. Before explaining the results, it is worth nothing that Group Two contains many more districts (N), than Group One. As mentioned in Chapter One, this difference gives reason to suspect there are other differences between the school districts in the two groups of states, and was purposely built into the research design.

Table 4.1 - Difference of Means Tests for Structural Variables

	Group 1			Group 2		
	N	Standard Error	Mean	N	Standard Error	Mean
Enrollment	125	5017.38	28891.27***	1309	127.9	2383.9
Number of Schools	125	6.8	45.41***	1312	0.27	5.7
Percentage of Charter Schools	125	0.005	.037***	1307	0.002	0.014
Student Teacher Ratio	125	0.3122	16.75**	1307	0.086	15.78

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 4.1 shows several obvious differences between the two groups of states. Districts in Group One are larger, in both the number of students served and the number of schools operated, have fewer teachers per-students as indicated by a higher student

teacher ratio (though the difference is substantively small), and have a significantly larger share of charter schools than the districts in Group Two. Substantively, the difference in the percentage of charter schools between states is particularly significant.

Charter schools are public schools (in this case authorized by the district) that are managed at the school level and generally free from a variety of state regulations. Most important for this study is the different role that school boards play in the governance of district-charter schools compared to traditional public schools (Teske et. al., 2005). The budget, academic programming, and resource allocation for traditional public schools is generally done at the school board level. In other words, elected school boards have broad influence and input into the day-to-day operations of traditional public schools. In contrast, the day-to-day operations of district charter schools are generally handled at the school level. The district board is simply responsible for monitoring the performance of the charter school and deciding whether to renew, revoke, or non-renew the school's charter (Teske et. al., 2005). It follows that boards in Group One might be expected to engage in different governance behaviors dependent on the number of charter schools they oversee.

Table 4.2 - Difference of Means Tests for Demographic Variables 1

	Group 1			Group 2		
	N	Standard Error	Mean	N	Standard Error	Mean
Percent Male	125	0.001	.518*	1307	0.001	0.512
Percent Black	125	0.012	.107***	1307	0.003	0.046
Percent White	125	0.018	0.67	1307	0.005	.847***
Percent Hispanic	125	0.012	.164***	1307	0.002	0.048
Percent Non-White	125	0.018	.330***	1307	0.005	0.153

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

The demographics of the students served in the two groups of school districts also, as shown in Table 4.2, vary significantly. Though Group One does have a slightly

higher percentage of male students than group two, the difference is statistically significant but not substantively so (51.8% v. 51.2%). However, the racial differences are particularly striking. Group One serves significantly more Black and Hispanic students, and more minority students in general. On average Group One serves 33.0% percent non-white students compared to 15.3% in Group Two. Likely, the differences are attributable to the demographic make-up of the states. Group Two consists entirely of northern states, while Group One is made up of southern and western states with higher minority populations. Stubborn racial achievement gaps continue to plague the United States, meaning the task of school boards in Group One could be viewed as more difficult because they are enrolling more pupils from groups that on aggregate trail non-minority groups on achievement tests (Smith, 2005; Holzman, 2012).

Table 4.3 -Difference of Means Tests for Demographic Variables 2

	Group 1			Group 2		
	N	Standard Error	Mean	N	Standard Error	Mean
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	125	0.013	.514***	1307	0.005	0.406
Percent ELL	125	0.005	.055***	1307	0.001	0.02
Percent IEP	125	0.003	0.144	1307	0.001	0.14
Per-Capita Income of Community	124	421.302	18030.34	1306	153.5	20254.63***

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 4.3 lists the differences in various non-racial demographic indicators between the two groups. Most striking is the statistically significant difference between free/reduced price lunch eligibility, a proxy for socio-economic status. Over half, 51.4%, of the students served by districts in Group One are low-income. In comparison, only 40.6% of students served by districts in Group Two are low-income. Students from poverty often come with additional challenges such as hunger and familial instability that

manifest in poorer academic performance (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Meaning, the districts in Group One arguably have a tougher task (in terms of raising student achievement) than districts in Group Two.

Not surprising given the racial differences between the two groups, districts in Group One serve a statistically significant higher percentage of English language learners than districts in Group Two. However, there is no significant difference in the percentage of special needs students served by the two groups of states. Special needs students often generate more costs than other students, making the lack of a difference a rare place where both groups of states are likely affected similarly.

Table 4.3 also shows the per-capita income of communities served by districts in Group Two is significantly larger than the income level of communities served by districts in Group One. Part of this difference may be a function of the overall wealth of the states. Regardless, the differences reflect a difference in the strength of tax base in the two groups, which could serve as a proxy of community level educational attainment in the two groups, and perhaps an indicator of differences in the general fiscal health of the community.

Table 4.4 - Difference of Means Tests for Fiscal Variables

	Group 1			Group 2		
	N	Standard Error	Mean	N	Standard Error	Mean
Revenue Per-Student	125	629.256	11211.54	1311	87.158	11895.25*
Local Revenue Per-Student	124	622.995	5179.758	1311	103.571	4641.32
State Revenue Per-Student	124	196.12	4714.427	1311	55.89	6256.963***
Federal Revenue Per-Student	124	79.758	1317.347***	1311	21.494	996.976

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

A closer looks specifically at revenue variables in Table 4.4 reveals two major differences between the two groups. Group One receives significantly more federal revenue than Group Two, and Group Two receives significantly more state revenue than Group One. The difference in federal revenue is a logical by-product of Group One's significantly higher low-income population. A major source of federal funds to local education is Title funds targeted toward schools serving low-income pupils. In other words, more low-income pupils means more federal funding.

More interesting is the difference in state revenue per-student. In Group Two districts on average receive $6,356.96 per-pupil, while district in Group One receive only $4,714.43. This large difference is in indicator that the state governments on which local school districts rely make a substantially smaller investment in education in Group One. Surprisingly, total revenue per-student, though statistically higher in Group Two, is not all that much higher (less than $1,000) than Group One; this is because federal revenues are offsetting some of the difference in state revenues. Likely, the different governments on which school boards rely on for funding affects the priorities of the school boards in the different groups.

Table 4.5 - Difference of Means Tests for Achievement Variables

	Group 1			Group 2		
	N	Standard Error	Mean	N	Standard Error	Mean
Dropout Rate	102	0.187	2.817	859	0.126	2.441
Graduation Rate	107	1.066	73.785	1205	0.349	86.292***

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Finally, Table 4.5 lists the differences in achievement variables between the two groups of school districts. It is important to note that the number of observations for both

groups is reduced in Table 4.5 because not all school districts operate a high school, precluding them from having a dropout or graduation rate. Interestingly, there is no significant difference in dropout rates, but a very significant difference in graduation rates. The seemingly illogical finding is partly due to the difference in measurement of the two variables. Dropout rate is a one year variable measuring the percentage of all high school students that dropped out of high school in 2008-2009. In contrast graduation rate is a cohort statistic based on four years of data. In addition, it is possible for a pupil to not graduate in four years and also not be a dropout, meaning summing the dropout rate for four years and subtracting from 100 will not yield the graduation rate.

The difference in graduation rates could be a function of higher performance in Group Two. It could also be a function of lower-standards for graduation in Group Two. Regardless, it is a clear indicator that districts in Group Two graduate a higher percentage of their pupils from high school than districts in Group One.

The result of the series of difference of means test presented in Tables 4.1 – 4.5 demonstrate the significant, both substantively, and statistically, differences between the two groups of focus in this project. School boards in in the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are overseeing students that are less likely to be members of a minority group, impoverished, and learning English as a second language. School boards in Florida, Nevada, and Utah, are receiving less state revenue, serving a larger share of minority and low-income pupils, and graduating a smaller percentage of their students.

Demonstrating these differences is crucial in justifying the need to explore the role of board governance in influencing academic outcomes. Why? The results of the hypotheses testing reliant on the results of the governance survey could otherwise be

discounted as spurious findings attributable to other school district characteristics. However, the significant differences in these non-governance variables across the two groups of districts make such a dismissal illogical. More importantly, the model presented in Chapter Three is made more plausible if the role of governance is found to be similar in districts serving very different types of students. If governance is about making a series of situation dependent decisions based on the quality of group-interaction, effectiveness is dependent on a group's *recognition of and response to* the situation, *not the nature of* the situation.

Within State Predictors of Achievement

In addition to establishing group-to-group differences, establishing that predictors of academic achievement within states do not vary substantially adds support to the idea that school board governance, and not other fixed effects, is responsible for differences in academic outcomes at the school district level. This is not to suggest that that race or socio-economic status do not predict academic outcomes, but rather that these factors predict outcomes similarly across states. As mentioned in the introduction of this section, the working hypothesis is that significant predictors of school district academic outcomes do not vary substantially between states.

Data and Approach

A series of multi-variate regression analyses using the common measure of four-year graduation rate as the dependent variable are conducted to test the hypothesis. Several independent variables common to education research and known or suspected to influence academic achievement at the district level are included in all five models (Hanushek, 1994; Hanushek, 1997; Hanushek et. al,, 1998). Those variables are:

- Socioeconomic status as measured by free/reduced price lunch eligibility;
- Special needs status as measured by the percentage of students with IEPs;
- Student teacher ratio;
- Race as measured my the percentage of minority pupils;
- Total public revenue per-student;
- Per-capita income of the community served by the school district; and
- The percentage of schools in the district that are district-authorized charter schools.

Table 4.6 – Summary Statistics 1

	Florida			Utah		
Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Graduation Rate	67	68.87	8.77	40	82.01	9.46
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	67	0.58	0.12	41	0.45	0.14
Percent with IEP	67	0.16	0.03	41	0.13	0.02
Student Teacher Ratio	67	14.74	1.35	41	20.42	30.07
Percent Minority	67	0.41	0.2	41	0.18	0.14
Revenue Per-Student	67	10255.46	1696.93	40	10103.83	3107.98
Per-Capita Income	67	18640.79	4772.21	40	16283.25	4715.48
Percent of Charters	67	0.07	0.07	41	0	0

Table 4.7 – Summary Statistics 2

	Michigan			Minnesota		
Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Graduation Rate	520	81.32	13.37	322	87.12	10.26
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	549	0.47	0.18	335	0.39	0.14
Percent with	549	0.12	0.04	335	0.15	0.04

IEP						
Student Teacher Ratio	549	17.86	2.86	335	14.74	2.62
Percent Minority	549	0.19	0.21	335	0.15	0.17
Revenue Per-Student	551	10975.31	3994.86	338	11836.37	1977.26
Per-Capita Income	551	20444.55	5489.95	335	19383.16	4920.77
Percent of Charters	549	0	0	335	0	0

Table 4.8 – Summary Statistics 3			
	Wisconsin		
Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Graduation Rate	363	92.69	7.74
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	423	0.33	0.16
Percent with IEP	423	0.14	0.04
Student Teacher Ratio	423	13.91	2.04
Percent Minority	423	0.11	0.12
Revenue Per-Student	422	13151.56	2077.76
Per-Capita Income	420	20780.33	5991.18
Percent of Charters	423	0.04	0.1

Summary statistics for the independent and dependent variables are listed in Tables 4.6 – 4.8 for the states of Florida, Utah, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Note that Nevada is excluded from this particular analysis because off its small number (17) of school districts. Though Utah, with only 41 districts, is included, its results should be taken with a grain of salt given the small sample size.

Table 4.9 – Regression Results for Dependent Variable: Four Year Graduation Rate					
VARIABLES	Florida	Utah	Michigan	Minnesota	Wisconsin
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch	-32.01***	-34.66*	-40.27***	-18.78***	-18.12***
	(11.38)	(18.75)	(4.781)	(5.734)	(4.554)
Percent with IEP	-17.81	103.5	-50.21***	-3.689	18.02

	(27.90)	(64.16)	(16.02)	(13.35)	(15.64)
Student Teacher Ratio	0.253	-0.409	-0.397	-0.992***	-0.264
	(0.617)	(1.012)	(0.269)	(0.268)	(0.280)
Percent Minority	-12.21**	-11.82	-6.654**	-22.25***	-8.404**
	(5.438)	(15.07)	(2.740)	(4.179)	(3.856)
Revenue Per-Student	-0.000634	0.000854	-2.09e-06	-0.00114***	-0.000163
	(0.000516)	(0.000851)	(0.000264)	(0.000386)	(0.000288)
Per-Capita Income	0.000404	-8.04e-05	-0.000139	0.000352**	0.000128
	(0.000279)	(0.000384)	(0.000137)	(0.000139)	(0.000144)
Percent of Charters	-3.134	0	0	0	0.565
	(13.86)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(3.667)
Constant	90.67***	87.22**	118.5***	119.4***	100.5***
	(13.47)	(35.60)	(8.034)	(7.440)	(7.089)
Observations	67	40	519	316	363
R-squared	0.526	0.403	0.344	0.357	0.162

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

The results of the five multi-variate regression analyses are presented in Table 4.9. One initial observation is that the R-squared statistic (which shows the percentage of the variation of the dependent variables explained by the model) for the Wisconsin model is comparatively low, just .162. This is likely due in part to the relatively low standard deviation of graduation rates in Wisconsin. In other words, less variation may be explained because there is less variation.

Overall, the five models support the hypothesis that predictors of achievement (as measured by four year graduation rates) are similar across states. In all five states socio-economic status as measured by the percentage of district pupils eligible for free or reduced price lunch is a statistically significant negative predictor of graduation rates. In addition, in all states but Utah the percentage of minority pupils served by a school

district is a statistically significant negative predictor of graduation rates. The lack of significance in Utah is likely due to both that state's relatively homogenous population, and the small sample size used in this analysis.

Only in Minnesota are student-teacher ratio, revenue per-student, and per-capita community income significant predictors of graduation rates. While the size of the effects attributable to revenue-per student and per-capita income are very small, the student teacher ratio effects in Minnesota are both statistically and substantively significant. The single anomaly should be kept in mind if the governance surveys of Minnesota school boards differ substantially from the other states.

Overall, the five models support the hypothesis that significant predictors of achievement as measured by graduation rates are similar in districts in the five states included in the analysis. The strongest predictors of academic outcomes are socio-economic status and membership in a racial minority group. These findings are not surprising, and mirror the vast majority of research on academic achievement, and in particular graduation rates, in the United States (Swanson, 2003). Thus, further credence is given to the concept that within state characteristics as they relate to academic achievement measured by graduation rates are similar enough to support a comparative analysis between states.

Other Achievement Data

A problem with a district level analysis or academic achievement that looks across states is the use of non-comparable criterion referenced state-specific standardized tests. Fortunately, in the near future most U.S. states will be using one of two common assessments; the results of which are comparable across states (Gewertz, 2012).

Unfortunately, those new tests have not yet been given, and their results are obviously not available for this study. Nonetheless, standardized test data within states is available, and can be used to measure performance in comparison to other districts within the same state. Though the effects of board governance on standardized test scores cannot be equally measured by different test data, the presence of a positive or negative effect on a single state standardized test is certainly of interest, and can be used to enrich comparable findings on the impact of governance on graduation rates.

Because of the non-comparable nature of state-specific standardized test, multi-variate regression analysis, such as was used to predict graduation rates, is not used in this chapter to predict test scores. However a description of each state test and summary statistics for available state performance indicators on each test, are presented to create a familiarity with the tests used in each state.

Florida

Florida uses the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, knows as the F-Cat, as its official state standardized assessment. According to the Florida Department of Education the state began in 2010-2011 using its second iteration of the assessment, called the F-Cat 2.0. The test is given to all public school pupils in grades 3-8 in reading, grades 3-10 in math, and grades 5 and 8 in science. For this study I am focusing on 8th grade achievement on the F-Cat 2.0 in math and reading to serve as a satisfying complement measure of district achievement.

Table 4.10 shows the percentage of students in Florida districts scoring at achievement level 3 or above, which according to the Florida Department of Education,

indicates students are performing at a satisfactory level.[1] As can be see in Table 4.10, there is wide variation in district performance in the state of Florida.

Table 4.10 – Percentage of Florida Students in Achievement Levels 3 and Above in 8th Grade - 2011-2012

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading	67	54.22	9	27	71
Math	67	54.31	10.41	20	77

Nevada

The official assessment in Nevada is the Nevada Proficiency Examination Program (NPEAP). Tests to measure math and reading performance are given to students in Grades 3-12. The summary statistics in Table 4.11 show the percentage of students in grades 3-8 deemed by the Nevada Department of Education standards to be meeting or exceeding expectations in 2011-2012. Though less variation than Florida, there is substantial variation in performance between the small number of Nevada districts.

Table 4.11 – Percentage of Nevada Students in Grades 3-8 Meeting or Exceeding Performance Expectations - 2011-2012

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading	17	69.82	10.11	48	83
Math	17	61.47	8.67	44	75

Utah

The performance measure available from the Utah Department of Public Education is the 3rd grade Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) benchmark reading test. The summary statistics in Table 4.12 show the percentage of students in Utah districts meeting reading benchmarks in 3rd grade. Like Florida and Utah, there is significant variation in the performance across school districts in Utah.

[1] See: http://fcat.fldoe.org/fcat2/pdf/achlevel.pdf

Table 4.12 – Percentage of Utah 3rd Graders Meeting Reading Benchmarks - 2011-2012					
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading	40	73.23	11.83	44	93

An obvious shortcoming of the Utah test score data is that it is an indicator of performance early in the academic career of students. Accordingly, in addition to the differences in tests between states the differences in what tests are designed to measure in individual states must be considered when interpreting the impact of governance on achievement indicators. Nonetheless, the 3rd reading test does adequately serve the purpose of supplementing the uniform performance measure of graduation rates.

Michigan

Students in Michigan take the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) assessments, known as the MEAP exams, in grades 3 – 9 in math and reading. The Michigan Department of Education reports the percentage of students deemed proficient by school district in each of these grades. Note that the summary statistics in Table 4.13, which indicate wide variation, include non-district charter schools which, for purposes of state testing, are treated as if they are their own independent school district.

Table 4.13 – Percentage of Michigan 8th Graders Deemed Proficient on the MEAP - 2011-2012					
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading	684	57.45	14.88	0	94.7
Math	684	23.96	15.41	0	89.5

Minnesota

The official state assessments in Minnesota are called the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs). The MCAs are given in math in grades 3-8 and 11, and in reading in grades 3-8 and 10. The summary statistics below show the mean

and range percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations set by the Minnesota Department of Education on the MCAs in 8th grade reading and 11th grade math.

Table 4.14 – Percentage of Minnesota Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on the MCAs - 2011-2012					
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading (Grade 8)	341	67.72	19.26	0	95.8
Math (Grade 11)	342	37.74	15.92	0	80

Wisconsin

The official state assessment in Wisconsin is the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WCKE). The WKCE is given to public school pupils in grades 3-8 and 10 in reading and math every fall. Unlike other states, Wisconsin presents pooled test score information across grade levels, so the summary statistics in Table 4.15 show the average percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced, as deemed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), across all tested grade levels in the district. It is also necessary to note that cut-off points for what DPI considers proficient were changed in the 2012-2013 school year, meaning the results presented should not be compared with results in future years.

Table 4.15 – Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on the WKCE in 2011-2012					
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Reading	418	85.03	6.9	0	98.6
Math	418	81.32	6.78	48.2	98.1

Of course, there are numerous limitations regarding the test score data presented. First, as mentioned, they are not comparable across states. Second, because states set their own standards for proficiency or meeting expectations, what is deemed success in one state could be less or more difficult to achieve than what is deemed success in

another state. Third, test scores do not show growth in achievement over-time, so a low-achieving district could merely look low performing because of the difficult students served. Fourth, no single test score can encompass the success or failure of a student; students may get test anxiety, may have areas of strength that do not show up in a standardized test score, etc. However, the use of achievement scores in measuring school and district performance is common practice, and can yield useful information.

For example, though student growth is not included in any of the presented achievement scores the use of pooled-data, or 8th grade data when available, will ensure that district scores have time to grow (i.e. from when a student starts testing grade 3 to grade 8). More importantly, the regression analyses used to draw conclusions about the impact of governance on outcomes controls for factors, such as socio-economic status, commonly known to negatively affect achievement on standardized tests. Comparisons across grade levels, i.e grade three to eight, are particularly problematic due to factors such as the growth of racial gaps over time, and should be interpreted with caution.

Conclusion

In this chapter two hypotheses are tested using archival data from the NCES, and from the Departments of Educations (or Public Instructions) in Florida, Nevada, Utah, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The first hypothesis, that their are significant differences in the make-up and structure of school districts in the two groups of states, is well supported. The second hypothesis - that the major predictors of school district academic outcomes in the six states of interest do not vary significantly by state - is also well supported. Finally, test score data for each state was presented demonstrating that there is significant variation in scores within states.

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, the accepting of these hypotheses supports the methodology of a most-different case-study approach for understanding the link between school board governance and academic achievement using the black box model of school board governance. Within the black box governance model it is theorized that school board members make a series of situation dependent decisions. Hence, the governance survey presented in later chapters seeks to measure the quality of group decision-making on school boards, rather than understand the specific policies pursued by boards. Because the two groups of states are serving substantially different populations, it is expected that school boards in either group will be making decisions regarding significantly different situations. For example, a school board in Nevada overseeing a district with a large ELL population will face a very different set of potential decisions than a board in Minnesota overseeing a homogeneous English speaking student body. However, if board performance is dependent on the quality of decision-making as theorized, a high-functioning board should be expected to make a positive impact in both situations. In other words, quality board governance affects outcomes across different types of governance situations. If the two groups were homogenous, the lone conclusion might be that quality governance matters only for specific situations.

The confirmation of the second hypothesis also validates the research design by demonstrating that achievement as measured by graduation rates in all six states studied is predicted by common factors. There are enough similarities to make a group-to-group comparison that is valid. So, for example, while the extent of poverty might differ by state, the effect of poverty in all six states is comparable. Knowing this enables a common set of control variables to be used in the state groupings when attempting to

isolate the impact of school board governance on variations in academic achievement variables.

In addition to testing these two hypotheses, this chapter presented and explained the summary statistics for the numerous archival variables used in quantitative models in the next chapter. As discussed there are notable limitations in the presented data that must be considered when interpreting the results of the regression analyses presented thus far, and those to follow. However, these limitations are noted and not serious enough to undermine the overall conclusions, or contributions made by this study.

Chapter V.
Survey Design and Summary Results

The previous sections of this dissertation establish why school boards can be theorized to impact school district performance, describe ways in which this relationship might work, and justify the comparative case study design focus on school boards in the states of Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Utah, and Wisconsin. This section describes the process by which the original survey data to test the three major hypotheses were collected. In addition to describing the process, a summary of survey data, including an analysis of the characteristics of school board members in the six states of interest, is presented.

Survey Design

The survey instrument used to collect data was developed by the author in collaboration with Douglas Ihrke and Barbara Duffy of the Helen Bader Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The instrument was developed and fine-tuned over the course of approximately nine months, from April 2012 to February 2013. The original draft survey contained over 130 questions, and was gradually reduced to 39 questions. The survey questions were adapted from a previous survey conducted by the National School Boards Association (Meeks & Hess, 2011), from a municipal government survey in Michigan (Irhke et. al., 2003), and drafted by the author. The survey instrument in full can be viewed in Appendix A.

Units of Analyses

The units of analyses targeted by the survey were individual school boards, and the school board as a unit. Some survey questions were worded to provide basic information about board members (i.e. sex, ideological leanings, years of service), while

others were worded to obtain information from individual school board members on their perceptions of the board as a whole. A similar strategy was used in previous school board surveys by Grissom (2012) and Hess & Meeks (2011).

Given these units of analyses, the goal of the survey is to maximize both the number of individual school board member respondents, and the number of school boards from which at least one response was obtained. This strategy does introduce a measurement problem for districts where multiple school board members respond. The previous surveys by Grissom (2012) and Hess & Meeks (2011) countered this by averaging out the responses for all responding school board members for every relevant question. This does introduce the possible risk that a minority viewpoint on the board is the only represented view, distorting the way in which the board actually functions. Though there is no practical way to counter this problem, data on the number of responses per-board is reported.

Sampling strategy

The goal of the survey design was to sample the universe of school boards in Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Utah, and Wisconsin, as well as non-profit independent charter school boards in Michigan and Wisconsin. As can be seen in table 5.1, there are 1,655 boards in the sampling frame. Between August, 2012 and December, 2012 a total of 5,175 e-mail addresses for board members were mined from school district websites, the directory of the Florida School Boards Association, and charter school directories publicly available from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Florida Department of Education. In total, contact information was obtained for at least one board member or board secretary in 83% of the sampling frame.

In total, 4,775 e-mails for traditional school boards and 400 for non-profit charter school boards were obtained.

Table 5.1 – E-mail Addresses Mined by State		
	Districts	Valid E-Mail Addresses Mined
Wisconsin	424	1,379
Michigan	552	1,568
Minnesota	340	1,238
Nevada	17	62
Utah	41	163
Florida	67	365
Michigan Charter	206	331
Wisconsin Charter	18	69
Total	1,665	5,175

Survey Logistics

The author obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the IRB board at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee on February 19, 2013. The study was ruled expedited, and assigned IRB# 13.275. After approval the survey was sent to all e-mail addresses along with a solicitation letter, and notice of informed consent on February 25, 2013 (A copy of the letter can be viewed in Appendix B). A follow-up solicitation was sent to non-responding board members two weeks later, and the survey was closed for good on April 15, 2013.

The initial overall school board member response rate was 27.35%. In comparison the response rate of the national school board member survey conducted by Hess & Meeks (2011) was 23.6%. However, as shown in Table 5.2, after data cleanup the usable board member response rate was 23.9%. In addition, the overall number of

actual usable response was 1,143, slightly larger than the Hess & Meeks (2011) response number of 1,020.

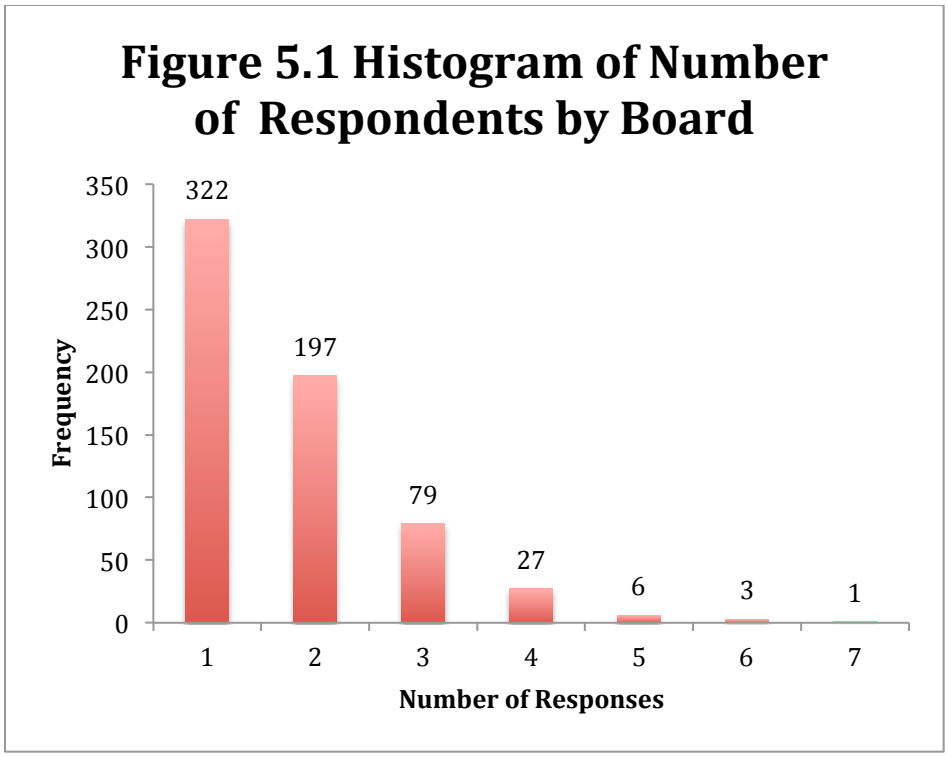
Table 5.2 - Individual Response Rates for Public School Board Members

	Valid E-Mail Addresses Mined	Responses	Response Rate
Wisconsin	1,379	321	23.3%
Michigan	1,568	345	22.0%
Minnesota	1,238	248	20.0%
Nevada	62	15	24.2%
Utah	163	33	20.2%
Florida	365	73	20.0%
Anonymous	n/a	108	n/a
Total	4,775	1,143	23.9%

Table 5.3 reports the total and state-by-state board level response rates. In total at least one response was received from 44.2% of school boards in the six states of interest. Figure 5.1 graphs the distribution of the frequency of responses. The majority of boards had one or two board member responses, while very few boards had 5 or more individuals respond.

Table 5.3 – Board-Level Response Rate

	Districts	Responses	Response Rate
Wisconsin	424	201	47.4%
Michigan	552	210	38.0%
Minnesota	340	156	45.9%
Nevada	17	9	52.9%
Utah	41	20	48.8%
Florida	67	41	61.2%
Total	1,441	637	44.2%



Unfortunately the response rate for independent non-profit charter board members was much lower, just 7.75%. Though the number of initial responses, 31, allows for some descriptive data analysis, (presented in Chapter Eight), they must be taken with a grain of salt. Accordingly, unless otherwise identified, all presented data refers only to responses from public school boards.

Aggregate Survey Results

A full listing of aggregate survey results for all 89-survey fields is available in Appendix A. However, in the remainder of this chapter survey results will be presented that shows the basic characteristics of school board members in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, Nevada, and Florida, and identifies key differences in school board membership in the two groups of states.

Who serves on boards?

Hess & Meeks' (2011) national survey on school board members finds the group to be largely white, middle-aged, highly educated, and conservative leaning. The results of my survey yield very similar findings. Table 5.4 lists the total racial make-up of all school board members in the sample, as well as the make-up of members in Group One (Florida, Utah, Nevada) and in Group Two (Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.) The overwhelming majority of board members serving identify as White. Though the possibility of response bias must be considered (i.e. Whites were more likely to fill out an online survey than other racial groups), the 2012 membership survey of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards provides evidence, at least in Wisconsin, that the overwhelming majority of school board members are indeed White (WASB, 2012). In addition, the underrepresentation of minorities on school boards has been identified in existing school board literature (Banks, 2000).

Table 5.4 - Race of School Board Members

	Group 1	Group 2	All
White	91.80%	94.06%	93.47%
African-American	3.28%	1.68%	1.79%
Hispanic	1.64%	0.22%	0.45%
Asian	0.00%	0.22%	0.18%
Native American	0.00%	0.90%	0.72%
Other	1.64%	1.23%	1.43%
Prefer Not to Say	1.64%	1.68%	1.97%
N	122.00	893	1,118

Table 5.5 shows that a majority of school board members in the sample are male. However, there is a substantive difference between responses by groups, with Group One

consisting of more females than males. However, a test comparing the group responses does fall just short of statistical significance at the 95% level of confidence.

Table 5.5 - Sex of School Board Members			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Male	46.28%	55.49%	53.38%
Female	52.72%	44.51%	46.62%
N	121	901	1,124

The average age of board members, shown in Table 5.6, is 53.25. However there is a large range of board member ages, with members ranging from the ages of 19 to 80. Members in Group One are slightly older than members in Group Two. Difference of means test reveals that within the sample board members in Group One are significantly older than members in Group Two at the 99% level of confidence. However, the average board member in both of the groups can safely be described as middle-aged.

Table 5.6 - Mean Age of School Board Members			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
	57.33	52.72	53.25
N	111	841	1,042

In terms of ideology the average board member in the sample identifies himself or herself as conservative or moderate more often than liberal or non-partisan (see Table 5.7). This basic difference holds true across groups, however in Group One very few board members identify themselves as liberal, while almost half (45%) identify themselves as conservative. Meaning, the average board member (in the sample) serving in Florida, Utah, and Nevada is more likely to be conservative than the average board member serving in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Given the overall ideological representation of the population in these states, the difference is not surprising. In the

area of educational attainment, shown in Table 5.8, the board members in both group of states are similar to the previously mentioned national survey; on whole they are highly educated.

Table 5.7 - Ideology of School Board Members			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Liberal	7.50%	19.71%	18.11%
Conservative	45.00%	31.19%	32.61%
Moderate	33.33%	37.16%	37.12%
Non-Partisan	14.17%	11.94%	12.16%
N	120	888	1,110

Table 5.8 - Education Levels of School Board Members			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Did not finish high school	0.00%	0.15%	0.12%
High school graduate or GED	1.09%	4.16%	3.92%
Some college	29.35%	24.19%	24.46%
Bachelor's Degree	30.43%	34.21%	34.19%
Advanced Degree	39.13%	37.29%	37.50%
N	92	649	741

The demographics of school board members in the sample are similar to the demographics of board members found in previous works. Though there are small differences between the two groups of states, the average board member is White, in his or her 50s, highly educated, and moderate to conservative in his of her political beliefs.

How did they come to serve?

Perhaps more interesting than board member demographics are the responses to a series of questions on how individual board members came to serve. For example (see Table 5.9) school board service for a large majority of respondents in both groups is an individual's first experience holding elected office. And, as listed in Table 5.10, most school board members are fairly stable in their positions, having served for five or more

years. This finding is important given this project's attempt to link board governance with performance; if any connection between governance and success indicators is identified a level of board member longevity must be assumed to exist so as to support the idea that the governance behaviors of current board members have had some time to affect performance.

Table 5.9 - Have You Held Elected Office Before?			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Yes	6.56%	13.80%	13.31%
No	93.44%	86.20%	86.69%
N	122	891	1,112

Table 5.10 - Board Member Length of Service			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
0-2 years	15.57%	20.27%	19.79%
3-4 years	13.93%	20.16%	19.07%
5-6 years	13.93%	14.37%	14.35%
More than 6 years	56.56%	45.21%	46.79%
N	122	898	1,122

In recent scholarship on school board performance it is assumed that school board elections are generally not contested affairs; meaning a position on a school board is essentially a position for life if desired (Hess & Meeks, 2013; Finn & Keegan, 2004). The results presented in Table 5.1l refute this notion. A majority of board members report that they did in fact have an opponent in their most recent election. Interestingly there is a large difference in answers between groups, with Group Two having substantially more contested elections. A chi-squared test confirms the difference is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence. However, these differences do not change the overall finding that school board members in the sample are at least as likely to have an opponent in their most recent election as not, providing reason to

question the growing acceptance that school board members in general do not face significant electoral accountability. Even with evidence that elections are often low-turnout affairs, there is little reason to suspect an opposed election even without high-turnout to be inherently non-competitive (Berry & Howell, 2005).

Table 5.11 - Was Your Last Election Opposed?			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Yes	50.41%	65.40%	63.80%
No	49.59%	34.60%	36.20%
N	121	896	1,116

Another interesting question is whether the professional background of board members could theoretically influence their decision to serve on a school board. For example, are substantial numbers of board members former teachers? The answer, seen in Table 5.12, is yes. Though board members are much more likely to not be former teachers, over one in ten are. In Florida, Utah, and Nevada, the number is particularly high, almost one in three. Another survey question asking about members' current occupations found that the majority of employed board members work in business, education, law or medicine, or sales.

Table 5.12 - Have You Ever Been Employed as a Teacher in Your District?			
	Group 1	Group 2	All
Yes	33.70%	10.05%	12.53%
No	66.30%	89.95%	87.47%
N	92	647	814

In total, school board members in the sample are likely to have served for a significant amount of time, been opposed in their previous election, and working professionally outside of their board service in a few specific areas. Perhaps a reflection

of the unpaid nature of most board service, these findings suggest school board members in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Florida, Utah, and Nevada are making significant time and effort commitments to serve in a position that does not provide them with economic support.

What are board member priorities?

Thus far the presented survey results establish the demographics of board members and the ways in which they came to serve. But what do they care about? What are their priorities? The research overview in Chapter one presented the traditional role of school boards as being the hiring and firing of staff, monitoring fiscal performance, and advocating for the district (Callahan, 1975). The results in Table 5.13 suggest something slightly different for today's school board members.

On average, board members in both groups of states ranked the setting of academic standards as their highest priority. In other words, the observations of the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry, that school boards play an important role in the academics of a district, hold true in the minds of board members. Also highly ranked are the traditional roles of monitoring district finances and hiring the superintendent. Though there appears to be a substantial difference in where the groups of states prioritize the hiring of the superintendent, this is likely do to a structural difference. A significant number of superintendents in Florida are elected rather than hired, hence several observations in Group One list the hiring of a superintendent as their lowest priority due to the fact that they do not hire the superintendent.

Table 5.13 - Ranking Board Member Priorities from 1 - 10

	All	Group 1	Group 2
Setting Academic Standards	3.37	3.01	3.39
Strategic Planning	3.44	3.83	3.52

Monitoring Fiscal Performance	3.67	4.4	3.56
Hiring the Superintendent	4.8	6.17	4.74
Setting Assessment Policies	5.44	4.88	5.48
Holding Staff Accountable for District Performance	5.7	5.84	5.71
Setting Behavior Policies	6.36	6.05	6.39
Interacting with the Public	6.38	6.6	6.37
Board Development	7.68	7.33	7.74
Collaborating with Interest Groups	8.07	7.9	8.09
N	762	86	606

Somewhat confounding is the low priority placed on interacting with the public and collaboration with interest groups. Scholarship by Moe (2005), Finn & Keegan (2004) and others have dismissed school boards as tools of special interest groups; these findings suggest that boards member themselves certainly do not see themselves that way. In addition, the argument that school boards serve an essential public accountability function by being accessible democratically elected local officials is to a degree undermined by the comparatively low-priority placed on interactions with the public.

What type of districts do they serve?

Tables 5.14, 5.15, and 5.16 list the summary statistics of various variables of the school board members included in the sample. On average, school board members who responded to the survey serve in districts that are 80% white, have just over 1/3rd of their students receiving free/reduced lunch subsidies, and have graduation rates of 85.53%. There is large variation for all these variables, and the group-to-group differences mirror those identified in Chapter 4, suggesting that the school board members surveyed represent a good cross-section of districts in the two groups of states.

Table 5.14 - Summary Statistics for Districts from all Board Member Respondents

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max

Students	1032	7857.98	25759.36	44	347366
Percent White	1032	0.8	0.19	0.02	1
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	1032	0.36	0.18	0	0.91
Schools	1033	14.2	37.71	1	515
Graduation Rate	974	85.53	12.74	3.8	100
Student/Teacher Ratio	1032	16.29	2.71	8.2	24.8
Per-Pupil Revenue	1027	1156.34	2059.76	7047	28158
Percent Students w/ IEP	1032	.11	.06	0	.31

Table 5.15 - Summary Statistics for Districts from Group 1 Respondents

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Students	121	40224.93	64353.57	341	347366
Percent White	121	0.63	0.21	0.04	0.94
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	121	0.52	0.14	0.22	0.82
Schools	121	62.26	92.35	5	515
Graduation Rate	103	72.78	11.43	40.7	100
Student/Teacher Ratio	121	16.76	3.58	11.1	24.8
Per-Pupil Revenue	118	10108.03	1760.06	7047	15402
Percent Students w/ IEP	121	.14	.03	.09	.24

Table 5.16 - Summary Statistics for Districts from Group 2 Respondents

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Students	911	3559.1	5546.43	44	77757
Percent White	911	0.83	0.17	0.02	1
Percent Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	911	0.34	0.17	0	0.91
Schools	912	7.82	11.83	1	175
Graduation Rate	871	87.03	12.03	3.8	100
Student/Teacher Ratio	911	16.23	2.57	8.2	24
Per-Pupil Revenue	909	11733.05	2022.63	8548	28158
Percent Students w/ IEP	911	.10	.07	0	.31

The summary statistics in Tables 5.14, 5.15, 5.16 also provide an opportunity to test the relationship between various school board member demographic variables and academic attainment as measured by graduation rates. The black box model of school

board governance presented in Figure 3.2 theorizes that the background of school board members is a factor in determining the decision premise upon which school board members go about the actions of governance (Simon, 1957).

Existing literature on school boards and local politics gives specific reason to suspect that the gender of school board members affects their priorities, methods, and ultimately performance. Vijayalakshmi (2002) argues from a feminist perspective that women have specific unique interests tied to their gender that influence the performance of organized institutions. Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997) give some context to the diversity of political interests among different genders by presenting evidence of a gender gap in political engagement, concluding the area female political engagement is most prominent is education politics.

Deckman (2007) identifies differences in the reasons why men and women, respectively, run for school board. Men, for example, are more likely to say they want to impact government policy, and more likely to cite religious motivations than women. Fox and Scuhmann (1999) look at local city officials and find that female officials are more likely than men to say they want to serve the community. Perhaps most interesting, Grogan (1999) finds women in education fields are more likely than men to have a strong instructional background, and to seek consensus rather than control in group settings.

Though dated, a 1974 NSBA study gives very specific reasons to suspect gender representation plays a role in school district performance. That survey asked board members to cite their accomplishments during their service by area, specifically the NSBA asked board members to share the areas in which they feel they made the greatest contribution. A higher number of male board members than female cited

"Finance/Budget," and a higher number of female than male board members cited "Instructional," (NSBA, 1974, p. 35).

In addition to gender, there is ample research suggesting that ideology plays a significant role in the way in which people make both governance decisions and decisions in general (Gruenfeld, 1995; March, 1994; Hackworth, 2007). Also of interest is the way school board member age might impact school board performance as measured by academic attainment. Given the rapid changes in the use of technology and management techniques in education there is good reason to suspect that younger board members are more adept at governing for higher performance (Peterson, 2010; Christensen et. al., 2008; Moe & Chubb, 2009; Odden, 2011).

The three tables below, 5.17, 5.18, and 5.19, contain the results of OLS regression models testing the hypothesis that there exists a relationship between school board member demographics and background characteristics and school district performance as defined by high school graduation rates.[2] Table 5.17 shows the results of three OLS regression models using data for all school board respondents where the dependent variable is high school graduation rates. The only significant focal variable in these three models is the dummy variable indicating that a board member was formerly a teacher employed by the district. Interestingly the relationship is negative, indicating that districts with former teachers serving on their school board have lower high school graduation rates. However, comparisons of beta weights in each model show that the strength of this relationship is dwarfed by the negative relationships between race and

[2] Note that a control variable for the number of schools per-district was dropped due to multicolinearity. The reference variable for ideology was Moderate, and the reference variable for education was Some College.

socioeconomic status and high school graduation rates. In the All Variables model, for example, the former teacher dummy has a beta weight of -.07 while the Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch variable has a beta weight of -.52.

Table 5.17 – OLS Models Predicting High School Graduation Rates for All Board Members

VARIABLES	*All Variables* Graduation Rate	*Background* Graduation Rate	*Age and Gender* Graduation Rate
Age	0.0116		0.00299
	(0.0389)		(0.0382)
Female Dummy	-0.852		-0.784
	(0.742)		(0.725)
Conservative Dummy	0.458	0.694	
	(0.869)	(0.831)	
Liberal Dummy	0.231	-0.0304	
	(1.037)	(0.990)	
Non-Partisan Dummy	1.502	1.644	
	(1.211)	(1.168)	
High School Graduate Dummy	-1.580	-1.460	
	(1.981)	(1.841)	
Bachelor's Degree Dummy	1.085	0.675	
	(0.966)	(0.924)	
Advanced Degree Dummy	0.537	0.308	
	(0.994)	(0.932)	
Former Teacher Dummy	-2.903*		-2.785*
	(1.185)		(1.146)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-38.22***	-37.23***	-38.41***
	(3.016)	(2.883)	(2.915)
Pct. IEP	-8.233	-7.818	-6.103
	(7.490)	(7.269)	(7.370)
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	-0.341*	-0.312	-0.362*
	(0.168)	(0.163)	(0.166)
Revenue Per-Pupil	0.000201	0.000316	0.000278
	(0.000250)	(0.000244)	(0.000243)
Pct. Minority	-15.35***	-16.65***	-14.98***
	(2.683)	(2.569)	(2.655)
Number of Students in District	-1.43e-05	-1.80e-05	-1.33e-05
	(1.54e-05)	(1.36e-05)	(1.54e-05)
Constant	106.1***	104.3***	106.7***
	(5.562)	(5.094)	(5.360)

Observations	642	689	649
R-squared	0.532	0.528	0.527

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Tale 5.18 shows the results of identical OLS models restricted to school board members in Nevada, Utah, and Florida. Notably the model for All Variables is particularly strong with a R-Squared statistics of .611. The results are fairly similar to the all board member model with the notable exception of a statically significant relationship between a low board member level formal education, being a high school graduate, and district high school graduation rates. Under the model being a board member with a high school diploma as their highest level of attainment lowers the district high school graduation rate by 21.64 and 24.45 percentage points in the two models in which the variable is included.

Table 5.18 – OLS Models Predicting High School Graduation Rates for Group One Board Members

	All Variables	*Background*	*Age and Gender*
VARIABLES	Graduation Rate	Graduation Rate	Graduation Rate
Age	0.103		0.107
	(0.106)		(0.108)
Female Dummy	1.626		1.613
	(1.987)		(2.048)
Conservative Dummy	-2.956	-3.036	
	(2.231)	(2.228)	
Liberal Dummy	-4.109	-4.406	
	(5.118)	(5.197)	
Non-Partisan Dummy	-4.528	-4.309	
	(3.114)	(3.138)	
High School Graduate Dummy	-21.64*	-24.45*	
	(9.348)	(9.291)	
Bachelor's Degree Dummy	-1.920	-3.466	
	(2.678)	(2.595)	
Advanced Degree Dummy	2.784	-0.0984	
	(2.863)	(2.609)	

Former Teacher Dummy	-5.679*		-4.189
	(2.462)		(2.359)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-2.571	-7.330	-10.89
	(10.67)	(9.740)	(10.31)
Pct. IEP	-72.08	-67.36	-62.15
	(47.85)	(45.50)	(48.79)
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	0.295	0.286	0.144
	(0.389)	(0.386)	(0.385)
Revenue Per-Pupil	0.000983	0.00147	0.000170
	(0.000752)	(0.000741)	(0.000710)
Pct. Minority	-39.60***	-38.12***	-32.56***
	(7.524)	(6.884)	(7.287)
Number of Students in District	4.33e-05*	3.18e-05	3.52e-05
	(1.96e-05)	(1.73e-05)	(1.99e-05)
Constant	80.35***	83.88***	88.75***
	(18.23)	(15.58)	(17.58)
Observations	72	78	72
R-squared	0.611	0.574	0.534

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 5.19 shows the results of the identical OLS models restricted to board members serving in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. None of the focal variables in these models are statistically significant. Only control variables for socioeconomic status, race, and district size reach levels of statistical significance. Also of import is the lower R-Squared statistics for the Group One OLS models; the variables used in general are less explanatory than in Group Two.

Table 5.19 – OLS Models Predicting High School Graduation Rates for Group Two Board Members

VARIABLES	*All Variables* Graduation Rate	*Background* Graduation Rate	*Age and Gender* Graduation Rate
Age	0.0111		-0.000841
	(0.0414)		(0.0406)
Female Dummy	-1.186		-1.079
	(0.792)		(0.770)
Conservative Dummy	0.975	1.267	
	(0.934)	(0.882)	

Liberal Dummy	0.628	0.255	
	(1.060)	(1.002)	
Non-Partisan Dummy	2.021	2.118	
	(1.291)	(1.235)	
High School Graduate Dummy	-0.914	-0.790	
	(2.014)	(1.860)	
Bachelor's Degree Dummy	1.854	1.382	
	(1.016)	(0.967)	
Advanced Degree Dummy	1.075	1.001	
	(1.053)	(0.984)	
Former Teacher Dummy	-2.658		-2.507
	(1.355)		(1.312)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-40.54***	-39.63***	-40.88***
	(3.178)	(3.033)	(3.089)
Pct. IEP	-3.968	-4.643	-1.603
	(7.752)	(7.464)	(7.638)
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	-0.602**	-0.570**	-0.627**
	(0.200)	(0.193)	(0.198)
Revenue Per-Pupil	-6.14e-05	-4.17e-05	2.45e-05
	(0.000285)	(0.000277)	(0.000279)
Pct. Minority	-9.020**	-9.638**	-8.451**
	(3.147)	(3.025)	(3.135)
Number of Students in District	-0.000198*	-0.000198**	-0.000202**
	(8.36e-05)	(7.06e-05)	(8.21e-05)
Constant	113.0***	112.0***	114.4**
	(6.255)	(5.816)	(6.078)
Observations	570	611	577
R-squared	0.486	0.488	0.477

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Discussion and Conclusion

The presented results yield several interesting insights and questions into the relationship between school board member backgrounds and district level attainment. Overall, there is very limited evidence of a general relationship between school board member demographics and backgrounds and district level attainment. For example, a connection between gender and higher district level outcomes, identified by the author in a previous study of Wisconsin, does not appear to exist when Wisconsin results are

pooled with the five other states of interest (Ford, 2012). In addition, ideology and age, both of which present a myriad of theoretical reasons to suspect a relationship with performance yield no statistically significant relationship in any of the presented models.

The only two statistically significant independent variables were the dummy variables for being a former teacher (though only in the all board member and Group One models), and the variable indicating high school graduate as the highest level of educational attainment (also restricted to Group One). Somewhat surprisingly, the dummy for being a former teacher is negatively related to attainment in Group One. Intuitively, one might suspect that being a former teacher would bode well for school board performance given their experience on the ground in the district.

Consideration was given to the possibility that former teachers, perhaps disheartened with the academic direction of the district, run for school board in an attempt to change things. To test this possibility the author restricted the models in Tables 5.17 and 5.18 to school board members with three or more, and five or more, years of experience. The logic being that once a former teacher had longevity on the board, his or her experience would begin to have a positive impact. However, the results were not substantially different in the restricted models. It is possible that the skills needed to manage a classroom do not translate well to board governance. Or, because the negative impact was only in Group One, comprised of states with lower teacher pay and benefits, that former teachers serving on these boards ran primarily to improve the comparatively worse compensation packages in their states.

The negative relationship between low board member education levels and district attainment observed in Group One is a meaningless finding. It is driven be a single observation from a very low-performing district.

While the extensive original data presented on school board member characteristics in the six states of interest paint a picture of a typical school board member - White, in his or her 50s, politically moderate to conservative, elected in a contested election – the findings in Tables 5.17, 5.18 and 5.19 show that there is no ideal school board member in terms of demographics and background. Even the finding of a negative link between being a former teacher serving on a school board and district graduation rates presents, at best, a flimsy case.

This begs the question: Does it matter who serves on school boards? Clearly school boards perform certain tasks as described in previous chapters, and intuitively the skills and background members bring to those tasks are important. However, the primary finding in this chapter, that no ideal prototype of a school board member exists, is on the surface problematic. The outgrowth of this conclusion is that improving the performance of school boards as it relates to affecting academic outcomes is not as easy as finding better people to serve on school boards. Hence, the increasingly popular notion that the primary failing of school board members is that they are merely interest group pawns elected in low-turnout elections is inherently flawed (Maeroff, 2010; Keegan & Finn, 2004). The challenge of improving school board performance is more complex than moving elections to increase turnout, recruiting better candidates, or limiting the role of Democracy.

The following chapter switches the unit of analysis from the individual school board member to the school board as a group. This shift in the unit of analysis reflects prior research by Grissom (2012), but also assumes that when measuring the effects of adherence to the key work of school boards the board itself is greater than the sum of its parts. While the demographics and backgrounds of school board members may not, on aggregate, directly affect district performance, they do affect the governance process. In other words, as stated previously, the way in which board members go about performing the essential tasks of school boards matter in the context of the school board as a whole. We should not expect an ideal board member prototype to exist in an institution as localized and situation dependent as school boards. So yes, the backgrounds of school board member do matter, but primarily as they relate to the school board as a whole.

Chapter VI.
Connecting Board Governance to Outcomes: Testing the NSBA Key Work of School Boards

A school board member serving in the United States looking to maximize the effectiveness of his or her governance behavior can draw upon any number of scholarly and non-scholarly sets of best practices. Most of these best practices focus on common good government themes long present in existing literature on governance. However, as the primary role of school boards is more universally recognized as raising student achievement there grows a need to better understand the connections between the best practice and good governance literature and academic outcomes.

The most prominent set of best practices is the *Key Work of School Boards* created by the National School Boards Association (NSBA). As will be explained in the literature review, the Key Works consist of a several policy areas established through consensus that to which, the NSBA suggests, boards looking to improve academic achievement should adhere. The following chapter operationalizes adherence to the key works of school boards with 17 survey items answered by school board members on a five point Likert scale. The goal is to establish whether boards indicating greater levels of adherence to the Key Work areas also have better academic outcomes. This chapter tests the following hypothesis:

Greater adherence to the eight components of the NSBA's Key Work of School Boards positively impacts district level academic outcomes.

There are several notable limitations to the methodologies deployed in this chapter. First, the questions operationalizing the degree of adherence to individual Key Works were generated by the author. Though questions were tweaked, reviewed by

school board experts, fellow students, and faculty, there is no way to guarantee that they perfectly align with the Key Works. However, the significant overlap between the survey questions and many of the concepts highlighted in the school board literature ensure that the responses at the very least contribute new and meaningful knowledge on the connection between board governance perceptions and academic outcomes.

Second, the survey responses are only measures of school board member perceptions, not actual observations. Though survey answers for boards with multiple respondents were averaged out in a methodology employed by Grissom (2012), they still must be taken as perceptions. It is also possible that certain items were prone to response bias, but there is no reason to believe that any biases differed by sub-group, suggesting they were consistent. The limited impact of individual board member characteristics on academic outcomes established in the previous chapter lends a degree of support to this conclusion.

Third, the academic outputs used to measure board performance are flawed out of necessity. Though high school graduation rates is an intuitively satisfying indicator of school district success reported to the National Center for Education Statistics, the standards and requirements for graduation vary across states. Similar limitations exist with the use of high school dropout rate as a dependent variable. Whenever possible group-to-group comparisons and the use of test achievement data in Wisconsin are used to strengthen (or give cause to question) identified links between governance and outcomes.

Finally, the largest limitation is the difficulty in proving with a high-degree of confidence that adherence to these keys actually caused better or worse district academic

outcomes. To offset this limitation, models restricted to boards with a self-identified high level of stability in terms of board turnover, control variables for district level demographics, and control variables for board member characteristics are used. Though the use of these methods still precludes concluding with absolute certainty that board governance characteristics directly changed academic outcomes, they do allow for a high-degree of confidence in conclusions that certain governance behaviors are linked to higher school district-level outcomes.

Literature Review

Gemberling et. al. (2000) authored the official *Key Work of School Boards* document with their stated goal as answering "[w]hat can board members do to ensure that their school boards meet the demands for increased student achievement" and "what are the actions boards need to take." (Gemberling et. al., 2000, p. 1.)" Much emphasis in the document is placed on systems thinking; in other words all of Key Works are described with the other Key Works in mind. The specific Works are:

- Vision;
- Standards;
- Assessment;
- Accountability;
- Climate;
- Collaboration; and
- Continuous Improvement

Importantly the NSBA does not claim that their recommendations are research based, however the organization does state (Gemberling et. al., 2000, p. 1):

> The purpose of the Key Work is to help school boards engage their communities and improve student achievement through effective governance. The better these eight essential areas are integrated into a systematic process, the better the results will be for all stakeholders.

In other words a very specific claim is made that adherence to these areas should be expected to improve district level results. The best practices highlighted by the NSBA mirror best practice recommendations for school boards made by other organizations. The Center for Public Education's "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards," for example, emphasize that effective boards work together, work closely with their superintendent, use data, and collaborate with staff and the community (Devariecs & O'Brein, 2011).

Others, including Rice et. al (2000), Walser (2009) and Smoley (2009) offer up very similar best practices emphasizing collaboration with stakeholders, staff accountability, and systems thinking. But in all of these best practices there is limited research that higher achieving boards actually focus on the highlighted topics or exhibit highlighted characteristics. The following section attempts to fill this research gap by building on the evidence identifying the importance of school boards unearthed by the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry by specifically linking each Key Work of board governance to the survey answers of school board members in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Florida and Utah.

Data

Figure 6.1 lists the numbers of board level responses by state and group, as well as the number of districts in each category. As stated earlier the board level response rate, defined as the number of school boards where at least one board member responded to the survey, was 44.2%. By design this project is a case study, meaning the results

should not be taken as generalizable to school boards as a whole, however, the large number of observations compared to previous school board research as well as the comparative design does allow for meaningful insight into the effects of school board governance (Hess & Meeks, 2011).

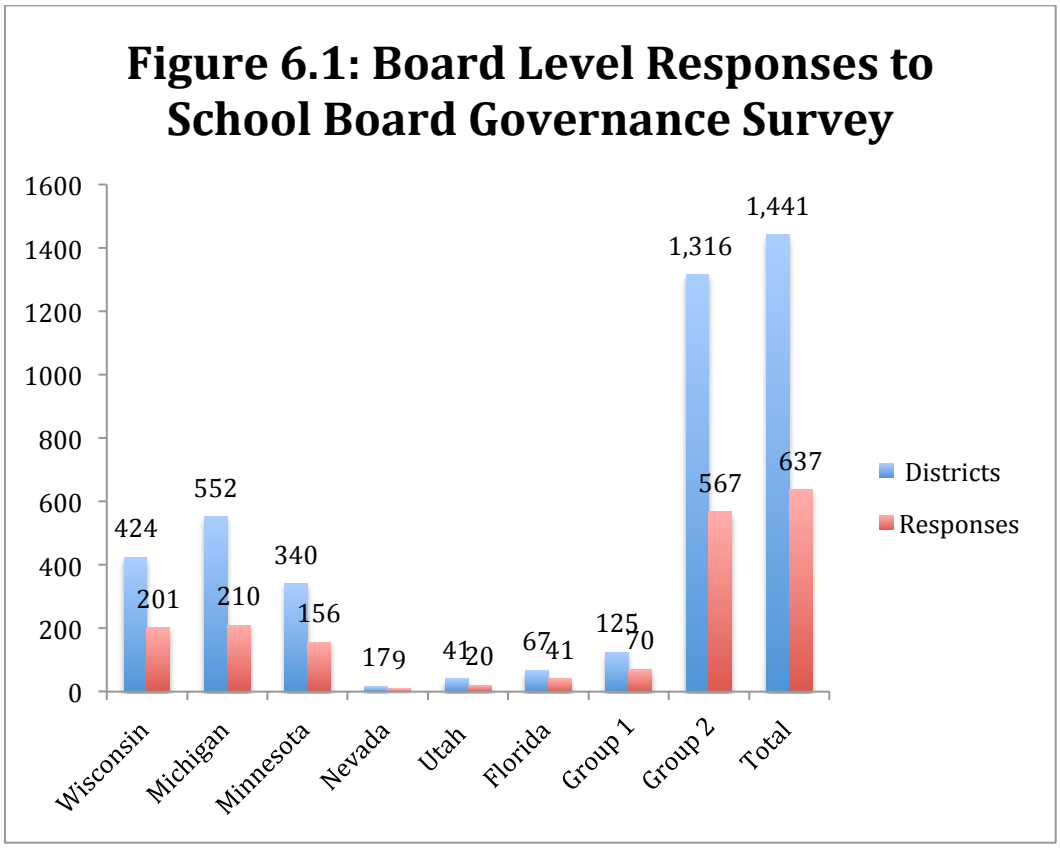


Table 6.1 contains the actual survey statements board members were asked to evaluate on a five point Likert scale (where 1 = no agreement or description and 5 = complete agreement or description). Responses from boards with multiple respondents were, in-line with previous school board survey research, averaged out to create board level variables (Grissom, 2012; Hess & Meeks, 2011). The means and standard deviation of each board level variable are also listed in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 – Questions Linked to Key Works of School Boards			
Vision	Obs.	Mean	SD
We engage in continuous strategic planning, our plan is frequently updated	482	2.99	1.23
We engage in planning when the academic and/or fiscal direction of the district needs to be changed.	482	3.22	1.08
Standards			
We set and tweak district academic standards in response to student needs.	483	3.31	1.01
Assessment			
We set and tweak district assessment policies in response to student needs. For example, if we see our students struggling in math we will increase the use of math assessments.	481	3.29	.99
Accountability			
We support and defend the decisions of the Superintendent until concerns with those decisions arise.	478	3.00	1.16
We allow the Superintendent to manage the district as he or she sees fit, but regularly monitor and review his or her performance	479	3.90	.96
Members take responsibility for past decisions.	488	3.63	.78
Alignment			
My school district has adopted a performance budgeting process. Programs must show and document activities and levels of program success in order to continue receiving current levels of funding.	488	1.96	.92
Climate			
Members are open about how they feel about other members' preferences.	487	3.29	.84
Members are open about their own preferences.	488	3.81	.70
Members willingly try new things without fear of ridicule.	488	3.47	.87
Members willingly try new things without fear of retribution.	487	3.55	.88
Collaboration and Engagement			
We look for a superintendent (or principal if a charter board) that shares the values of, and is willing to be a collaborator with, the school board.	478	3.94	1.03
We regularly listen to the ideas of organized interest groups and act on their input when we deem it appropriate.	478	2.83	1.05
We regularly listen to the ideas of community members and act on their input when we deem it appropriate.	478	3.52	.84
Continuous Improvement			
We frequently and consistently engage in board development activities.	475	2.90	1.30
We do not engage in any formal board development	479	2.04	1.11
All variables on 1 to 5 scale where 1 = No agreement or description and 5 = Complete agreement or description			

Table 6.2 contain summary statistics for the district-level outcomes variables sorted by group, where Group One = boards in Nevada, Utah, and Florida, Group Two = boards in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and Stable = boards where the board level response to the statement "In the past five years our school board has had very little board turnover" is at or above three. The use of the stable board restriction is an attempt to gauge any differences between boards with a mutual governance history and those where governance behaviors which may not have had time to actually affect outcomes. As explained earlier, the two dependent variables measure two fundamentally different things. High school graduation rate represents a long-term achievement and is an intuitive measure of district academic health (Swanson, 2003). Dropout rates are a single year variable measuring a district failing; the inability, for whatever reason, to keep a child enrolled in school.

Table 6.2 – Summary Statistics for Dependent Variables			
Graduation Rate	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
All Boards	597	85.33	12.92
Group One	60	72.63	11.09
Group Two	537	86.75	12.33
Stable Boards	414	85.08	13.06
Drop Out Rate			
All Boards	593	2.47	3.19
Group One	67	2.64	1.73
Group Two	524	2.46	3.34
Stable Boards	414	2.52	3.39

In all models the following district level control variables are used unless otherwise noted:

- Percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch: A proxy for low-income status;
- Percent white student population;
- The percent of students with special needs as indicated as being assigned an individual educational plan;
- The pupil-teacher ratio, an indication of school level staffing; and
- The total amount of public revenue per-pupil received by the district.

All of these control variables are well established to have an effect on academic achievement outside of the control of school districts (socio-economic status, special needs status) or offer intuitive potential relationships with academic outcomes even if research is mixed (pupil-teach ratio and total revenue per-pupil). Additional control variables were considered and excluded. The percentage of district students with English Language Learner status was excluded due to high multicolinearity with race. The number of schools operated by the district as well as the location (urban, rural, suburban, or town) were excluded due to high multicolinearity with number of students served.

Board member control variables for race, background, age, and sex were excluded in board level models due to a low degree of certainty that the demographics of a subset of board members across districts represents the demographics of the board as a whole. While this problem may be present in any board level variable, there is more reason to assume, including in the results linking board member demographics to outcomes in the previous chapter, that perceptions of board members and any potential perception bias are evenly distributed (Hess & Meeks, 2011; Grissom, 2012).

Lastly many of the OLS models discussed in this chapter, as well as in following chapters, presented a significant heteroskedasticity problem. These issues are likely a result of using pooled data across states. As was demonstrated in Chapter Four, there are substantial data differences between states. In general heteroskedasticity, as detected through Breusch-Pagan and White Tests, was more of an issue in models including data from all six states, and less of a problem in models restricted to groups of similar states. When found to be an issue robust regression models were run and results compared to the regular OLS models. Though the robust regressions did not reveal any substantive changes in results, the presence of heteroskedasticity nonetheless should be kept in mind when reviewing results for models using data from multiple states.

Results

Tables 6.3 – 6.6 list the statistically significant OLS regression results (at at-least the 90% level of confidence) for each individual focal variable listed in Table 6.2 on four populations of school boards: All districts, Group One, Group Two, and stable boards. The rationale behind running models for each variable individually is two-fold. First, the existence of multiple indicators for each key created large multicolinearity problems in an all-inclusive model. Second, understanding the individual effects allowed for additional analysis that combines the responses for variables suspected of having an impact. This additional analysis is important given the NSBA's assertion that the Key Works are meant to work in a systems model.

Table 6.3 – Significant Results for OLS Regression Models Testing Relationship Between Individual Key Works and Graduation Rates -1				
	All Districts		Group 1	
Accountability				
Regularly monitor and review Superintendent.	.762* (.455)	N= 452 R-Sq.=.507		

Collaboration and Engagement				
Listen to organized interest groups when appropriate.	-.985** (0.413)	N=450 R-Sq.=.516		
Superintendent as willing collaborator.			1.738* (.863)	N=44 R-Sq.=.67
Continuous Improvement				
No board development.				

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.10 **p<.05

Table 6.4 – Significant Results for OLS Regression Models Testing Relationship Between Individual Key Works and Graduation Rates - 2				
	Group 2		Stable Boards	
Accountability				
Regularly monitor and review Superintendent.	.815* (.491)	N=407 R-Sq.=.458		
Collaboration and Engagement				
Listen to organized interest groups when appropriate.	-.968** (.443)	N=405 R-Sq.=.466	-1.135** (.528)	N=268 R-Sq.=.506
Superintendent as willing collaborator				
Continuous Improvement				
No board development	-.798* (.418)	N=407 R-Sq.=.469	-1.250** (.561)	N=269 R-Sq.=.518

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.10 **p<.05

Tables 6.3 and 6.4 test the relationship between indicators of adherence to individual Key Works and high school graduation rates. Among all districts the main findings are that superintendent accountability has a positive relationship with graduation rates, and that collaboration with interest groups has a negative relationship with graduation rates. The Group One only results also reveal a positive relationship between superintendent collaboration and graduation rates, but no indication of a negative impact from collaboration with interest groups. The Group Two results and stable boards only results reveal an additional notable finding of a negative relationship between the absence

of formal board development and graduation rates. Also, the positive relationship between the superintendent and board disappeared when restricted to stable boards only.

Table 6.5 – Significant Results for OLS Regression Models Testing Relationship Between Individual Key Works and Dropout Rates -1				
	All Districts		Group 1	
Accountability				
Support and defend Superintendent until concerns arise.	-.212** (.092)	N=447 R-Sq.=.213		
Regularly monitor and review Superintendent	-.234** (.110)	N=448 R-Sq.=.212		
Collaboration and Engagement				
Listen to organized interest groups when appropriate.	.197** (.098)	N=447 R-Sq.=.197		
Continuous Improvement				
Consistently engage in board development.	-.139* (.084)	N=444 R-Sq.=.213		
Standards				
Set standards in response to needs			.425* (.228)	N=49 R-Sq.=.478
Collaboration and Engagement				
Superintendent as willing collaborator	-.314** (.125)	N=473 R-Sq.=.163		

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.10 **p<.05

Table 6.6 – Significant Results for OLS Regression Models Testing Relationship Between Individual Key Works and Dropout Rates - 2				
	Group 2		Stable Boards	
Accountability				
Support and defend Superintendent until concerns arise.	-.206** (.100)	N=398 R-Sq.=.215	-.213** (.108)	N=269 R-Sq.=.238
Regularly monitor and review Superintendent	-.250** (.121)	N=398 R-Sq.=.217		
Collaboration and Engagement				
Listen to organized interest groups when appropriate.	.237** (.107)	N=397 R-Sq.=.203	.242** (.109)	N=269 R-Sq.=.217
Continuous Improvement				
Consistently engage in board development.				
Standards				
Set standards in response to needs				

Collaboration and Engagement				
Superintendent as willing collaborator	-.268** (.136)	N=422 R-Sq.=.156		

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.10 **p<.05

Tables 6.5 and 6.6 list the results of OLS regression models for indicators of adherence to the *Key Work of School Boards* and high school dropout rates. The results across groups are very similar to the results presented for the dependent variable graduation rates. Among all boards support and even collaboration with the superintendent is related to lower dropout rates, as is engagement in continuous strategic planning. Also present is the negative impact of collaboration with interest groups.

The one confounding finding is the presence of a positive relationship between dropout rates and setting standards in response to student needs on Group One boards; in other words setting standards in response to student needs relates to higher dropout rates. One plausible explanation is that because Florida, Utah, and Nevada all use high stake testing that can result in grade retention, struggling students are discouraged and drop out. Even simpler, increasing standards could drive away some students that are unable to meet these higher standards. So, while dropout rates go up students remaining in school may be better served, or at least show better aggregate results.

The OLS regression results presented show some initial findings. First, none of the indicators of the Key Works have a negative relationship with district level outcomes except collaboration with interest groups. Second, two concepts appear to have a positive relationship with district outcomes:

1) Planning and development; and
2) Superintendent accountability and collaboration.

Table 6.7 lists the summary statistics for an additive index variable combining board level responses to indicators of adherence to several Key Works. Accountability and Collaboration as measured by the board's perception of their level of collaboration with their superintendent, and Vision and Improvement as measured by the level of agreement that a board engages in frequent board development and consistently updates its strategic plan. This combined variable measures the board's focus on several Keys suspected of having a positive impact,

Table 6.7 – Summary Statistics for Combined Positive Keys

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Combined Keys	470	10	2.5

Table 6.8 lists the OLS regression results for four models predicting the dependent variable graduation rates. In none of the models is the focal variable Combined Keys statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence. However, in three of the four models the focal variable Interest Group Collaboration is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence. The group-to-group difference in this finding is of particular interest and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Table 6.8 - OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Graduation Rates

VARIABLES	All Boards	Group 1	Group 2	Stable Boards
Combined Keys	-6.25e-05	0.492	0.0257	0.105
	(0.178)	(0.539)	(0.191)	(0.239)
Interest Group Collaboration	-1.032*	0.0930	-0.948*	-1.176*
	(0.426)	(1.164)	(0.456)	(0.544)
Students	-9.89e-06	1.25e-05	-0.000234	-1.60e-05
	(1.88e-05)	(1.84e-05)	(0.000141)	(2.48e-05)
Pct. White	16.92**	15.43	12.51**	11.23**
	(3.139)	(8.257)	(3.878)	(4.323)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-38.91**	-29.76**	-40.09**	-45.25**
	(3.533)	(10.83)	(3.863)	(4.611)

Pct. w/ IEP	-1.305	0.625	2.535	-6.168
	(8.969)	(51.19)	(9.432)	(12.14)
Pupil Teacher Ratio	-0.441*	0.563	-0.616*	-0.549
	(0.210)	(0.468)	(0.251)	(0.289)
Revenue Per-Pupil	0.000283	0.000322	0.000103	-0.000261
	(0.000302)	(0.000936)	(0.000344)	(0.000444)
Constant	93.25**	59.33*	102.3**	107.5**
	(8.037)	(22.59)	(9.152)	(10.92)
Observations	440	43	397	261
R-squared	0.522	0.667	0.469	0.517

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 6.9 contains regression results predicting the dependent variable Dropout Rate. Here only the All Boards model shows a statistically significant relationship between adherence to the Combined Keys variables and lower dropout rates at the 95% level of significance. In addition, the negative effect of interest group collaboration as projected through a relationship with higher dropout rates is present.

Table 6.9 - OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Dropout Rates

VARIABLES	All Boards	Group 1	Group 2	Stable Boards
Combined Keys	-0.0918*	-0.143	-0.0650	-0.0413
	(0.0423)	(0.108)	(0.0463)	(0.0501)
Interest Group Collaboration	0.229*	0.155	0.248*	0.284*
	(0.101)	(0.227)	(0.110)	(0.114)
Students	-4.85e-06	-1.70e-06	5.16e-05	-4.98e-06
	(4.47e-06)	(3.69e-06)	(3.39e-05)	(5.21e-06)
Pct. White	-0.542	-0.510	-0.216	-0.979
	(0.751)	(1.602)	(0.942)	(0.915)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	6.549**	8.730**	6.881**	5.622**
	(0.848)	(2.111)	(0.944)	(0.982)
Pct. w/ IEP	-9.547**	-5.244	-10.19**	-7.509**
	(2.145)	(9.316)	(2.307)	(2.554)
Pupil Teacher Ration	0.120*	0.270**	0.0646	0.0710
	(0.0482)	(0.0930)	(0.0581)	(0.0582)
Revenue Per-Pupil	-0.000141*	4.25e-06	-0.000220**	-0.000171*
	(6.92e-05)	(0.000162)	(7.97e-05)	(8.62e-05)
Constant	1.346	-4.132	2.395	2.318
	(1.868)	(4.550)	(2.163)	(2.206)

Observations	437	47	389	262
R-squared	0.205	0.491	0.204	0.220

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

All of the models thus far focus on graduation rates and high school drop-out rates, but what about test scores? As explained earlier the use of test scores as a dependent variable is problematic in a multi-state study due to the non-comparability of tests between states. However, for the sake of exploratory research models were run for each Key Work indicator using the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Reading Exam as the dependent variable. Table 6.10 shows the lone significant finding at the 95% level of confidence was the negative effect of the absence of board development on Reading proficiency levels. Results were similar when 2008 test scores were used a control variable, meaning that at least in Wisconsin the absence of board development is a negative predictor of reading test score proficiency, as well as a negative predictor of changes in test score proficiency since 2008.

Table 6.10 – Significant Result for OLS Regression Models Testing Relationship Between Individual Key Works and Reading WKCE Scores

No board development.	-1.37* (.542)	N=149 R-Sq.=.256

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05

Discussion and Conclusion

On whole it is possible to accept the hypothesis that yes, adherence to the *Key Work of School Boards* has a generally positive impact on academic outcomes. Of course, this conclusion comes with many caveats that merit further discussion.

First, of all the keys only accountability, vision, and continuous improvement yield a generally positive effect. There is clear evidence holding the superintendent accountable for performance, and planning through the use of a strategic plan and board development yields positive outcomes compared to boards that are less focused on these things. However, the effect of collaboration is trickier.

Collaboration with the superintendent is a positive form of collaboration. In contrast to some recommendations in the governance literature that boards should maintain a hands-off relationship with their CEO, close relations and collaboration between the superintendent and school boards in the states of interest serve a positive function (Carver, 2007). However, collaboration with interest groups has a clear negative effect on student outcomes. Interestingly this negative effect appears to be driven by the school boards in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota, as well as boards that have a higher level of stability. There are many reasons to theorize why school board collaboration with interest groups has a negative effect on outcomes in these situations.

First, it is possible that interest groups dedicated to employee issues as opposed to student issues shift board member attention away from improving student performance. For example, if the primary policy issue in a district is teacher pay it is possible that student achievement concerns will be made secondary, if not ignored. It is also possible that interest groups dedicated to lowering the property tax levy or increasing the use of charter schools have a similar impact of moving student achievement concerns to the bottom of the priority list.

Second, the larger number of school districts and more localized nature of district in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota may increase the number and scope of interest

groups which board members in these states have to deal with. Simply, interest group collaboration may be a time-suck for hyper-localized districts dealing with hyper-localized concerns that fall out of the scope of daily work for board members overseeing large districts.

Third, the negative effect of interest group collaboration on stable boards may be related to the politicization of school board elections. The longer a board member serves, the more they may feel indebted to the interest groups that supported them in their most recent election. If those interest groups are pushing issues unrelated to student achievement academic improvement may become a lower priority.

The theoretical explanations for the positive relationships between good superintendent-board relations and board development and improved outcomes fits nicely with the theorized black box model of school board governance in Chapter Three. In that chapter school board governance is described as a series of situation dependent decisions, which if made correctly, positively impact district academic performance. Not only must board members be in tune to what is possible, wanted, and beneficial in their local context, they must be high functioning with each other to enable them to even begin their decision making process under the correct premise. Engaging in strategic planning is an easily identifiable way to determine that a school board is working to understand what it wants to be, thereby understanding how it might get there. Engaging in board development is a clear indicator that a board is seeking to improve the way in which it goes about decision-making. Together it increases the odds that a board understands what it wants to do and is working actively to ensure the governing processes are in place that allow the board to accomplish its goals. It follows that good relations with the

superintendent are a positive. The ground game of education is constantly shifting and some sort of connection between the man or woman making decisions influencing that ground game is in tune with improving the situation dependent decision-making ability of the school board.

The fact that many of the indicators of the *Key Work of School Boards* did not have a direct relationship with academic outcomes is not reason to discount the individual concepts or to mothball the entire document. The fact that the only negative finding was a very specific type of collaboration should lead to a high degree of confidence that boards adhering to the best-practices presented by the NSBA are experiencing better outcomes than those that are not.

Potential future work to further these findings includes observational research of a sample of school board meetings testing actual adherence to these best practices by a neutral observer as opposed to a survey of member perceptions. Additional work digging deeper into the content of specific strategic plans and better understanding of the range of board development processes can also further these findings. However, the presented results provide good evidence that:

1) Specific concepts highlighted by the NSBA – accountability, vision, and continuous improvement – are positively related to improved district level outcomes; and
2) Collaboration with interest groups is generally correlated with negative district level academic outcomes.

Thus far it has been established that what board members bring to the governance process has a minimal direct connection to district academic outcomes but where they

focus their efforts does impact district academic outcomes. The next chapter will look beyond the topic areas of focus for school boards in the six states to their perceptions of how they actually go about the governing process.

Chapter VII.
School Board Group Dynamics, Zones of Discretion and Academic Outcomes

In its most romantic form a school board is the ultimate exercise in local control and democracy. Citizens of communities win elections for unpaid positions to gather with other citizens to decide how best to educate the children in their community. Elections are non-partisan, so the institution is not poisoned by party politics. The lack of pay ensures people view the position as public service; the desire to do good outweighs the desire for power. But reality is not so romantic.

Sometimes board members disagree on the appropriate direction of a district; both sides convinced they are right. Sometimes board members form coalitions. Sometimes board members do not like each other. Sometimes non-partisan board elections are non-partisan in name only. Sometimes board members have radically different constituencies and agendas, i.e. taxpayers versus public employees. And more times than not local control is undermined by state and federal policies.

This chapter attempts to explain the relationship between the small group dynamics of publicly elected school boards and academic outcomes. Unlike the previous chapter, the unit of analysis will be the individual board member rather than the board as a whole. This approach, used in previous research on the small group dynamics present in city councils, still allows for connections to be made between board member perceptions and the performance of the school districts they represent, but also for the use of board member control variables that allow for a better isolation of the connection between small group dynamics and outcomes (Ihrke & Niederjohn, 2005; Nelson & Nollenberger, 2011).

Specifically this chapter tests two hypotheses:

1) *The presence of dynamics typical to a high-functioning small group on a school board positively impacts district level academic outcomes; and*
2) *Boards exercising larger zones of discretion have comparatively better academic outcomes.*

Literature Review

The sociologist Lewis Coser (1956) laid out a basic framework for understanding the positive and negative functions of social conflict in small groups. Coser argued that not all conflict is bad, in fact conflict can often be a way for people to blow-off steam, say in an argument, without damaging the quality of work at the task at-hand. To put in another way, conflict is more complicated than a good-bad dichotomy.

Almost fifty years after Coser Jehn (1997 & 1999) used qualitative work to identify three specific types of conflict; relationship, task, and process. A school board can conflict over a process such as who should be the board president, a task such as which superintendent to hire, or over a personal relationship where two people do not get along. All three of the types of conflict identified by Jehn were shown by Heidbreder et. al. (2011) and Ihrke & Niederjohn (2005) to have slightly different effects on city councils in Michigan and Wisconsin.

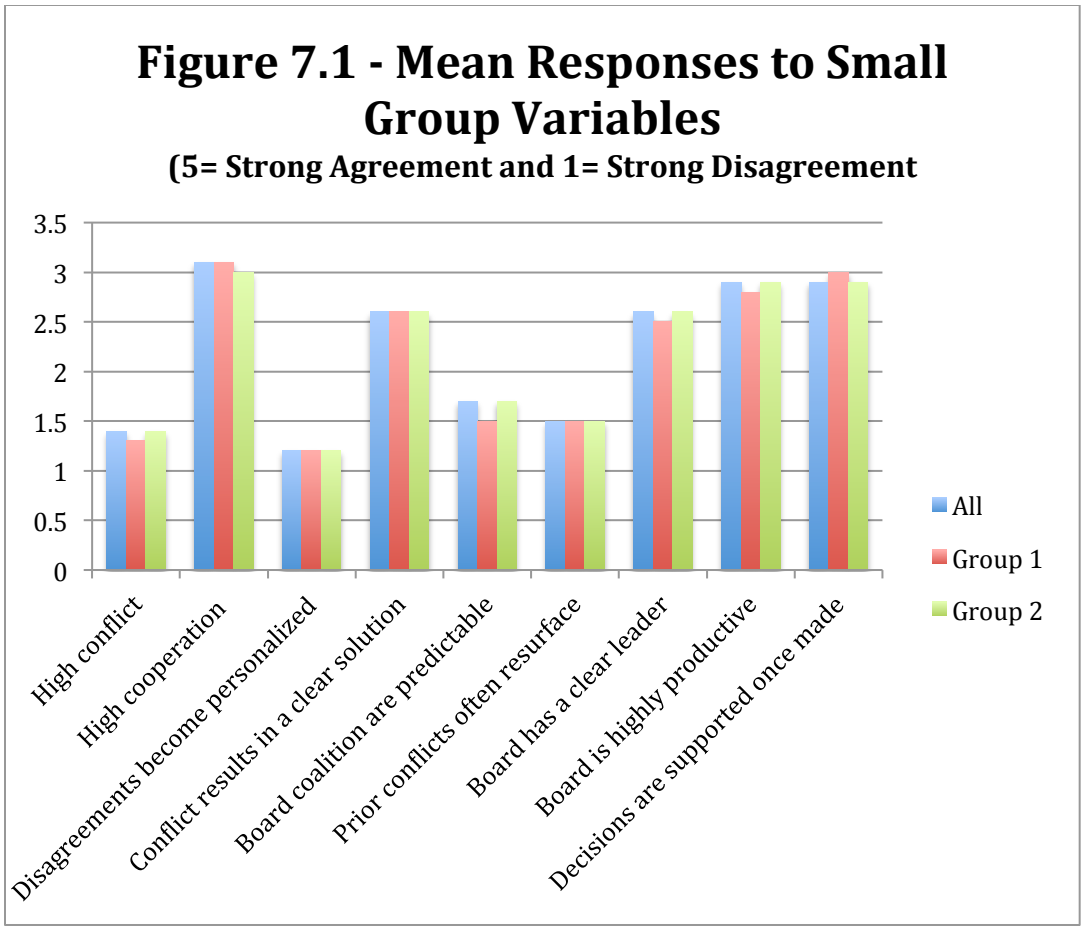
But small group interaction is more than conflict. Gabris (2006) identified several characteristics of high-functioning small groups, including sharing common goals and values, and getting along with the CEO or superintendent in the case of school boards. Small group interactions also are driven by governance structure. How did a board member come to serve? For example was it through a contested election? Or does the board adapt a specific governance model as identified by Gill (2002).

And what about the environment in which boards operate? What is their capacity to make decisions? Michael Kirst (2009) and Jennifer Hochschild (2005) argue that school boards have a very small zone of discretion that limits their ability to make decisions that impact district academic outcomes.

The following sections of this chapter will explore the role of small group dynamics on school boards. Unlike many non-profit boards or city councils, school boards have the advantage of having simple to understand intuitive indicators of the success of the organization they oversee: graduation rates, drop-out rates, and test sores. As explained in Chapter one this study accepts that the primary role of school boards is to maximize academic achievement. Hence, quantitative methods are used to better understand the relationship between the small group dynamic perceptions of school board members in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Utah, Nevada, and Florida, and district-level academic outputs.

Data and Results

School board members in the six states of interest were asked their level of agreement with a series of statements related to small group dynamics. All questions were adapted, word-for-word whenever possible, from previous surveys of city councils conducted by Heidbreder et. al. (2011) and Ihrke & Niederjohn (2005). The survey had a total individual board member response of rate of 23.9% (See Table 5.2). The mean responses are presented in Figure 7.1; the total number of observations with valid responses range from 808 to 814 (Note that the 5 point Likert scale is reversed for the regression models so that 5 = strong agreement and 1 = strong disagreement, for the ease of interpretation).



To partially test the first hypothesis, using the same district level control variables as the previous chapter, a series of OLS regression models for all board members testing the relationship between graduation rates and indicators of overall, relationship, task, and process conflict were run. Like in the previous chapter, the decision to run individual models for each small group dynamic variable was made due to high muticolinearity in an all-inclusive model. The results in Table 7.1 indicate that board members perceiving higher levels of overall conflict and having higher levels of agreement that prior conflicts resurface have a significantly lower graduation rate at the 95% level of confidence.

Table 7.1 – OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Graduation Rates, Focal Variables Only			
Overall Conflict	Coefficient	N	R-Squared
High conflict	-.774**(.290)	696	0.529

High cooperation	.458 (.387)	697	0.525
Relationship Conflict			
Disagreements become personalized	-.127 (.301)	693	0.523
Prior conflict resurfaces	-.688* (0.308)	697	0.525
Coalitions form along predictable lines	-.466 (.280)	696	0.527
Task			
Conflict is productive	.546 (.376)	698	0.527
Decisions are supported once made	.363 (.336)	698	0.525
Process			
The board has a clear leader	.333 (.326)	695	0.526
The clear leader is also the president	.361 (.304)	697	0.525

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

These results suggest that broadly school board conflict serves a negative function as it relates to graduation rates. Relationship conflict appears to be particularly destructive. Table 7.2 shows the results of the same OLS models except the dependent variable is dropout rates, yielding only one statistically significant variable; higher perceptions of cooperation yield lower dropout rates. These results too support the conclusion that conflict in general serves a negative function on school boards as it relates to impacting academic outcomes, while cooperation in general is positive.

Table 7.2 – OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Dropout Rates, Focal Variables Only

Overall Conflict	Coefficient	N	R-Squared
High conflict	.083 (.076)	555	0.306
High cooperation	-.231* (.103)	557	0.31
Relationship Conflict			
Disagreements become personalized	.123 (.079)	553	0.306
Prior conflict resurfaces	.027 (.083)	556	0.302
Coalitions form along predictable lines	.052 (.074)	555	0.306
Task			
Conflict is productive	.007 (.100)	558	0.303
Decisions are supported once made	-.122 (.089)	557	0.306
Process			
The board has a clear leader	-.003 (.088)	555	0.305
The clear leader is also the president	.083 (.080)	556	0.306

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

But what about the impacts of board member characteristics? The same models were run incorporating the following series of board member control variables (See Chapter Five for summary statistics):

- Board member race;
- Board member age;
- Board member sex;
- Board member ideology through a dummy variable indicating identification as a conservative or moderate;
- Education level as indicated by a dummy variable for being a college graduate; and
- Dummy variables for employment in education or business.

The significant results for the focal variables presented in Table 7.3 shows that controlling for board member backgrounds yielded very similar results as the models without board member controls. Two focal variables, high conflict and the prior conflict resurfaces indicator of relationship conflict, are negatively related to graduation rates. The lack of influence of control variables is not surprising given the findings in chapter five on the relationship between board member backgrounds and academic outcomes. However, several models yielded a statistically significant relationship between board member employment in business or education sector and graduation rates, suggesting the possibility of an interaction between conflict and employment sector.

Table 7.3 – OLS Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Graduation Rates, Focal Significant Variables Only (with Board Member Controls)			
Overall Conflict	Coefficient	N	R-Squared

High conflict	-.886**(.309)	639	.534
Relationship Conflict			
Prior conflict resurfaces	-.886**(.327)	640	.533

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

There are logical theoretical reasons to suspect that experience in the business or education sector may interact with board conflict. Traditionally businessmen were viewed as the ideal school board members given boards' perceived role as the guarantor of public monies and the desire for public entities be run more like private business (Ashby, 1967; Ostrom, 2007; Goodsell, 2003; Stillman, 1990). It is possible that board members with business backgrounds (25.4% of survey respondents) and members with education backgrounds (15.84% of survey respondents) see the functions of the school board in different ways. Indeed, when comparing rankings of priorities for board members those employed in the business sector rank monitoring district finances at a higher level (3.19 out of 10) than those with an education background (3.51 out of 10). Conversely those employed in education rank the setting of academic standards at a higher rate (3.30 out of 10) than members employed in business (3.90 out of 10). It is easy to see how these differences in priorities interact with perceptions of conflict and cooperation. In addition, the significant findings regarding relationship conflict give reason to suspect that long-serving board members, by virtue of having had more time to form relationship conflicts, may also present an interaction effect.

Table 7.4 contains the results of two OLS models predicting graduation rates with several interaction terms. In Model One, the interaction term for high levels of cooperation and being employed in the business sector is statically significant at the 90% level of confidence (falling just short of the 95% threshold with a P-value of .056).

Meaning, the effect on graduation rates of having a higher level of cooperation for businessmen is actually negative (.267 - .380 = -.113). This is a somewhat confounding finding, but perhaps an indicator that cooperation among businessmen may fit along the historical school board literature as a sign of favoring fiscal health over academic outcomes (Ashby, 1967). The interaction term for high cooperation and working in the education sector is not statistically significant.

The results of Model Two presented in Table 7.4 indicate the interaction between having served as a board member for five or more years with higher levels of agreement that disagreements become personalized is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence. Meaning, the effect on graduation grates of having a higher level of agreement that disagreements on your board often become personalized is negative for long-serving board members (.823 – 1.945 = -1.122). This finding is less confounding; it is logical that the detrimental effects of relationship conflict on district outcomes intensify the longer time period a board member has to experience personalized conflict.

Table 7.4 - OLS Regression Results for Dependent Variable Graduation Rates with Interaction Terms

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2
High Cooperation	0.267	
	(0.455)	
Conservative/Moderate Dummy	-1.177	-1.138
	(0.915)	(0.886)
Business Sector	2.289*	0.551
	(1.323)	(0.912)
Education Sector	0.601	-0.392
	(1.734)	(1.118)
Minority Member	0.319	0.124
	(2.059)	(1.947)
College Grad Dummy	0.921	0.369
	(0.908)	(0.874)
High Cooperation-Education	-0.282	

Sector Interaction		
	(0.339)	
High Cooperation-Business Sector Interaction	-0.380*	
	(0.216)	
Students	-0.000208**	-1.64e-05
	(8.84e-05)	(1.90e-05)
Pct. White	7.150**	14.50***
	(3.370)	(2.938)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-37.74***	-36.90***
	(3.386)	(3.262)
Pct. w/ IEP	-10.57	-13.32*
	(8.228)	(7.904)
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	-0.484**	-0.286
	(0.214)	(0.190)
Revenue Per-Pupil	-0.000129	0.000120
	(0.000299)	(0.000278)
Sex	-0.986	-0.728
	(0.843)	(0.808)
Age	-0.00511	-0.0370
	(0.0482)	(0.0474)
Disagreements Become Personalized		0.823**
		(0.376)
Served for 5 of More Years		4.723***
		(1.100)
Personalized Disagreements-Served for 5 Years Interaction		-1.945***
		(0.488)
Constant	106.7***	93.86***
	(8.444)	(7.824)
Observations	437	469
R-squared	0.489	0.552

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In general the models including interaction terms lend support to the idea that conflict and cooperation affect boards differently depending on their unique make-up. Certainly, the potential for relationship conflict to increase its detrimental effects on graduation rates the longer it festers is supported.

As stated numerous times the absence of comparable test score data makes good comparisons of test score achievement across states impossible. However a crude measure of test scores achievement across states was developed to at the very least see if the negative relationship between relationship conflict and attainment and drop-out rates appears in test scores. Using the state level tests explained in chapter four a dummy variable indicating whether the percentage of district students deemed proficient on the state reading test increased between 2008 and 2012 was created. 386 of the board members surveyed in 2013 represented districts that experienced gains on their official state reading tests, while 223 represented districts that experienced reading test score declines.

The results presented in Table 7.5 must be taken with a huge grain of salt, however they do supplement the previous results showing a connection between relationship conflict as indicated by agreeing that coalitions form along predictable lines and the odds of having experienced gains in district level reading proficiency between 2008 and 2012.

Table 7.5 - Logistic Regression Results for the Dependent Variable Reading Gains, Significant Focal Variable Only

Relationship Conflict	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	N
Coalitions form along predictable lines	-145 (.074)*	0.865	651

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Thus far this chapter has focused on small group dynamics through the prism of conflict and cooperation rather than board structure. Table 7.6 shows the results of focal variables for six OLS regression models testing the relationship between board structural

variables and academic outcomes (Note all models included district control variables). The three structural categorical variables are:

1) Stability – Has the board member served for five or more years (686 of 1,143 members have)?;
2) Opposed in the most recent election (712 of 1,116 respondents were)?; and
3) Shared politics – Does the board member at least somewhat agree that they share political beliefs with their fellow board members (835 of 1,43 respondents agreed)?

Table 7.6 – OLS Regression Results for Structural Variables, Focal Variables Only

Dependent Variable: Grad Rate	Coefficient	N	R-Squared
Stable Board	-.207 (.245)	668	0.535
Opposed Election	.739 (.603)	956	0.527
Shared Politics	-272 (.648)	974	0.524
Dependent Variable: Dropout Rate			
Stable Board	.057 (.065)	534	0.309
Opposed Election	-.243 (.218)	765	0.254
Shared Politics	-.515* (.238)	778	0.264

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Overall these structural variables had little impact on district outcomes, the notable exception being the positive impact of shared politics on dropout rates. Agreeing that you shared politics with most of your fellow board members lowered the dropout rate by over half a percentage point.

Another structural characteristic of school boards potentially influencing academic outcomes is their governance model. Unfortunately there is little widespread agreement on best how to measure or characterize board governance models. After several attempts to operationalize the characteristics of certain models into a governance model scale the decision was made to simply to use the descriptions of several

governance models offered by Mel Gill (2002). Specifically board members were asked to identify which description best describes their board.

The responses, listed in Table 7.7, indicate that the overwhelming majority of boards say they are using the policy or management model of governance (responses were randomized in the survey design). Whether or not boards are actually formally adopting one of these models of governance is a separate issue. For example, though 54% of respondents chose the Policy Model description as the best description for their board, follow-up research suggests only a small handful of boards actually adopted the Policy Model of governance as described by Carver (2006).

Table 7.7 – Board Response to Governance Model Survey Question

	Pct.	N
Traditional: The board governs and oversees operations through committees established along functional lines (finance, human resources, programs) but delegates the management functions to the superintendent	3.39	27
Operational: The board manages, governs and performs the work of the organization.	3.02	24
Policy Model: The board governs through policies that establish organizational aims (ends), governance approaches, and management limitations. These policies also should define the relationship of the board with the superintendent. The superintendent broad freedom to determine the means that will be used to achieve organizational aims.	54.15	431
Management: The board manages operations through functional committees that may or may not have a staff coordinator.	39.45	314

Note: Bolded text not included in survey item.

With that caution in mind, OLS regression models using the descriptions of governance models as the independent variable (with operational model as the reference category) and graduation rates and dropout rates as the dependent variables were tested. The results, shown in Table 7.8, reveal that the only significant effect among focal variables was in Model Two, with boards using the policy model of board governance as

described by Mel Gill (2002) having a negative relationship with dropout rates. Agreeing with the policy model description lowers the dropout rate in the district the board member represents by over half a percentage point.

Table 7.8 - OLS Regression Results for Dependent Variable Graduation Rates

Variables	Model 1 Graduation Rate	Model 2 Dropout Rate
Policy Model	0.597 (0.678)	-0.533* (0.244)
Management Model	-0.0155 (0.743)	-0.224 (0.272)
Traditional Model	1.671 (1.909)	0.0440 (0.761)
Students	-0.0000249* (0.0000122)	-0.0000121** (0.00000397)
Pct. White	12.37*** (2.083)	-3.678*** (0.723)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-39.55*** (2.294)	8.051*** (0.857)
Pct. w/ IEP	-6.017 (5.703)	-12.21*** (2.093)
Pupil/Teacher Ratio	-0.384** (0.132)	0.311*** (0.0461)
Revenue Per-Pupil	0.000400* (0.000189)	0.00000723 (0.0000700)
Constant	92.40*** (5.009)	-1.273 (1.801)
Observations R-Squared	974 0.520	778 0.255

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

This finding should not suggest that adaptation of the formal Carver model of board governance should be expected to lower drop-out rates, as mentioned very few boards in the six states of interest actually formally adopt the Carvel model. However, it does suggest that board use of policies to define goals has a positive impact on outcomes. This finding is line with previous results in Chapter Six showing the connection between board vision and academic outcomes.

The presented results give no reason to reject the hypothesis that the dynamics typical to a high-functioning small group on a school board positively impact district level academic success. The evidence is strong that minimizing overall conflict, encouraging cooperation, minimizing relationship conflict, and sharing political views with fellow board members had a general positive impact on district level academic outcomes. However, these effects are influenced in part by the professional experience of board members who serve, and the length of time in which board members serve.

But what about board members capacity to make decisions? What about their zones of discretion? In Table 2.4 basic state-to-state differences in board member levels of discretion in different policy areas are presented. Understanding these differences is important, but simply comparing achievement outcomes across the states and drawing connections between their levels of discretion in certain policy areas and those outcomes is unlikely to pick up the level of micro-and-macro restrictions that boards face. For example two boards in the same state policy environment might have different local policies, some enacted by a prior board, that restrict their capacity to make decisions.

Instead, the impact of zones of discretion exercised by school board members is tested by modeling for the effects of going above what is required by state policy in the areas listed in Figure 7.2. The tested hypothesis is:

Boards exercising larger zones of discretion have better academic outcomes.

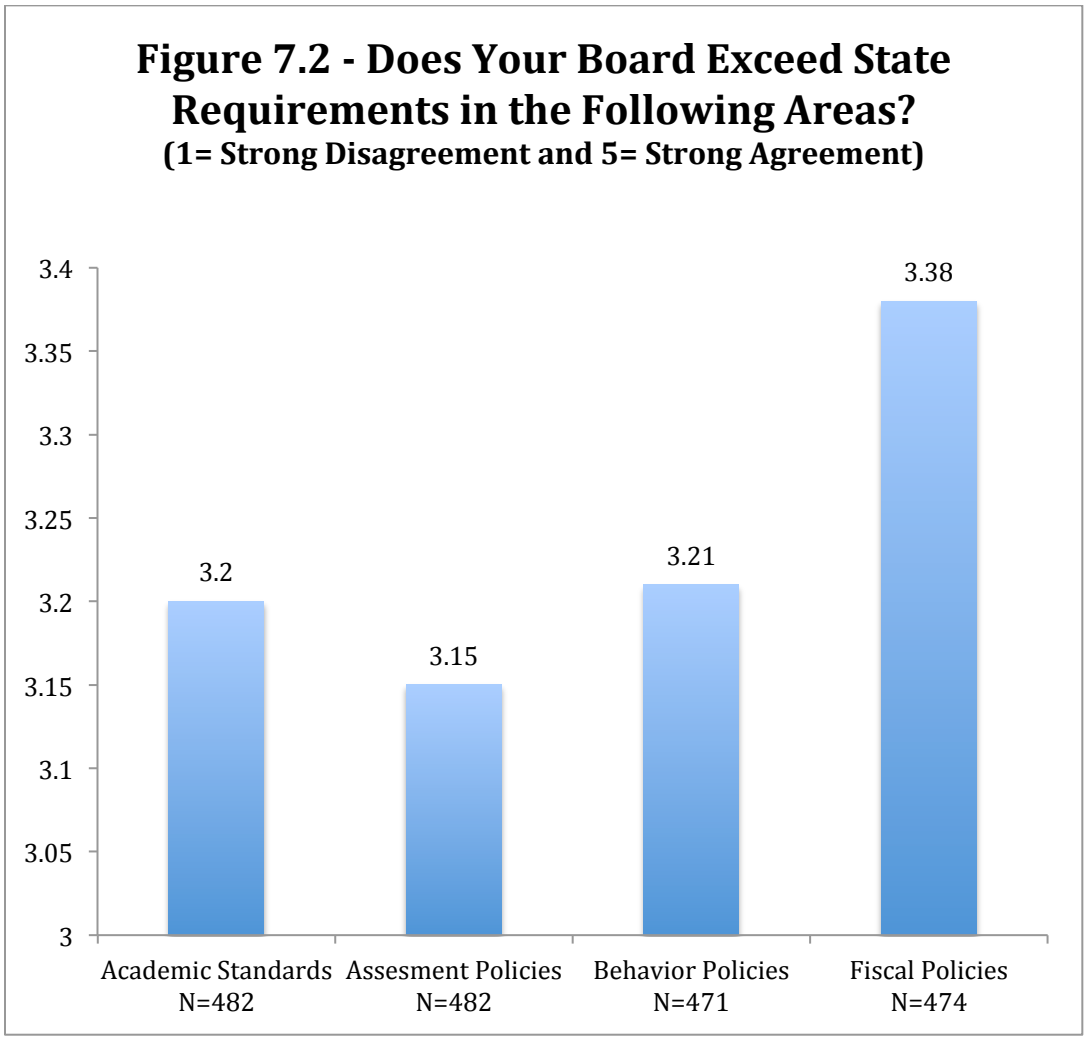


Figure 7.2 shows the board level average scores on a five point Likert scale asking board members to state their level of agreement that their board went beyond state requirements when setting academic standards, student assessment policies, behavior policies, and fiscal policies. In other words, the higher their score the more they agreed

they were exercising discretion in key policy areas. The lower the scores, the more likely they were to be simply following policies required under state law.

The board-level responses to each of these four survey items were added together to create a single variable indicating that boards in general exercise a high-level of discretion in key policy areas. The summary statistics for that variable can be seen in Table 7.9. In addition, a high discretion variable was created in the data set containing all board members with valid survey responses. This allows for additional analyses with board member control variables and interaction terms.

Table 7.9 - Summary Statistics for Additive Discretion Scale

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
Board Level	463	12.98	3.56	4	20
Individual Level	744	13.00	3.91	4	20

OLS regression model with the dependent variables graduation rates and dropout rates with school district control variables showed no significant relationship between the board-level variable for high discretion and outcomes. However, shifting to the school board member unit of analysis revealed an interesting interaction term between high discretion and being employed in the business sector. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there are reasonable reasons to suspect that board members employed in the business or education sector have unique roles in board governance. Table 7.10 shows the results of an OLS regression model predicting the dependent variable dropout rate; in the model the interaction between the high discretion variable and business sector dummy variable is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Table 7.10 - OLS Regression Results for Dependent Variable Dropout Rate with Interaction Terms

VARIABLES	High School Dropout Rate

High Discretion	-0.0360
	(0.0440)
Students	-2.01e-06
	(5.57e-06)
Pct. White	-0.160
	(0.930)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	9.751***
	(1.149)
Pct. w/ IEP	-12.47***
	(2.773)
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	0.250***
	(0.0629)
Revenue Per-Pupil	-6.45e-05
	(9.12e-05)
Conservative/Moderate Dummy	-0.847***
	(0.301)
Business Sector	-2.075**
	(1.051)
Education Sector	-0.325
	(0.376)
Minority Member	-0.666
	(0.587)
College Grad Dummy	0.147
	(0.301)
Age	-0.00479
	(0.0159)
Sex	0.368
	(0.280)
High Discretion-Business Background Interaction	0.154**
	(0.0773)
Constant	-2.373
	(2.636)
Observations	340
R-squared	0.326

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Specifically, being employed in the business sector has a negative effect on the relationship between exercising a high zone of discretion and dropout rate (-.0360 + .154

= .118); a businessman exercising a higher zone of discretion raises dropout rates compared to non-businessmen exercising a large zone of discretion. There are several plausible reasons to explain this finding; businessmen may be more active in fiscal policies and hence paying less attention to academic policies, or businessmen might be very active in setting strong behavior policies, which may drive disruptive students to drop out. Regardless, it is clear that businessmen exercising high levels of discretion have a slightly different effect on dropout rates than non-businessmen.

Two additional models testing the relationship between high board level discretion and test score proficiency on the Wisconsin state tests did find a significant relationship between boards exercising higher levels of discretion and the percentage of students scoring at least proficient on Wisconsin's state math test. The results, presented in Table 7.10, are a very specific case. But they do suggest, at least in Wisconsin, that school boards going beyond what is required in state law in setting key policies has a positive effect on test sores that is not seen in high school graduation or dropout rates.

Table 7.11 – OLS Regression Results for Dependent Variable Graduation Rates, Wisconsin Only

VARIABLES	Pct. Proficient Math 2012	Pct. Proficient Reading 2012
High Discretion	0.314***	0.155
	(0.0825)	(0.199)
2008 Math Proficiency	0.622***	
	(0.0654)	
Students	-1.40e-05	5.57e-05
	(9.83e-05)	(0.000235)
Pct. White	2.689	-5.429
	(4.395)	(10.40)
Pct. Free/Reduced Lunch	-11.08**	-9.185
	(3.849)	(8.869)
Pct. IEP	18.02	8.536
	(9.344)	(22.70)
Pupil Teacher Ratio	-0.135	-0.242

	(0.185)	(0.451)
Revenue Per-Pupil	5.88e-05	0.000337
	(0.000226)	(0.000540)
2008 Reading Proficiency		0.844***
		(0.208)
Constant	28.79**	15.56
	(8.793)	(26.33)
Observations	139	139
R-squared	0.764	0.299

Standard errors in parentheses
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Overall there is insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that school boards or individual board members exercising high zones of discretion in key policy areas are positively impacting academic outcomes. Though the Wisconsin specific results cannot be used to make conclusions beyond Wisconsin, as more states move towards a common comparable testing framework the possible connection between high exercising of discretion and math scores should be explored. In addition the effects of business sector employees on school board governance is worthy of future research.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter tested two hypotheses and found compelling support for one; that the districts overseen by school board members with positive group dynamic attributes are higher performing than those without such attributes. This finding has several implications.

First, school boards should work to minimize conflict and maximize cooperation. Though this recommendation is somewhat obvious, the direct connection between high-conflict and lowered graduation rates can cast the connection in a new light. Not only should conflict be reduced because it may create an unpleasant work environment, it may also be hurting a school district academically. The negative effects of relationship

conflict in particular fit into the framework of the black box model of school board governance. The task of making good situation dependent decisions is made more difficult if not impossible when a board is dominated by personal conflict. The finding that the negative effects of relationship conflict are enhanced when board members serve for long periods of time suggest that periodic turnover on boards, whether voluntary or enforced through term-limits, may have a positive impact on district outcomes.

The relationship between board members' use of the policy model of governance and lower dropout rates lends further support to the findings in the previous chapter that board planning and vision are linked to enhanced outcomes. Simply, when boards have an idea of what they want to be, when they are cohesive, their districts have better outcomes.

The failure to find compelling support for the second hypothesis - that boards going beyond state requirements do not have improved outcomes - is still a substantively interesting finding. Boards should not expect to make better policy decision simply because they are making more policy decisions. Indeed, in some situations the policy dictated by the state may in fact be the best medicine for the district. Consistently going beyond state requirements in key policy areas may also lead to incoherent policies that change frequently over time. Though measuring frequent changes in policy over time is beyond the scope of the single-point survey used in this analysis, archival research on the policy coherence of school boards over time may be a useful future endeavor.

Perhaps the most relevant question stemming from the findings of this chapter is how? How can boards reduce conflict, particularly relationship conflict? How can boards be encouraged to have a coherent vision? How can boards find the right balance

between the quantity and quality of decisions in important policy areas? There are formal and informal answers to these questions.

Informally school board members can be aware of the presence of conflict on their board. A more formal approach is for board members to take a planning retreat, or dedicate a closed session every few months to the mitigation of board conflict. A statutory approach is for the legislature to proscribe that boards overseeing consistently low achieving districts be subject to a governance intervention where the board engages in a period of self-study with a governance consultant, or the more extreme action of forced term-limits. States could also build in use-or-lose-it funding for boards to spend on board development or strategic planning. Though in a period of tight state budgets such an approach is likely to face opposition, the potential pay-off in terms of improved district academic performance may actually make it preferable to other costly academic interventions yielding similar if not less-impressive academic gains.

It is more difficult to prescribe specific ways for boards to balance between high-action and actual high-productivity. The best approach to ensuring that the exercise of discretion yields academic gains is through the use of board development and strategic planning so the creation of policies that go beyond state requirements are made with measurable goals in mind. In other words, a new academic standard is not considered a governance end, but rather a tool to meet a measurable goal, such as test score improvement, prior to the implementation of the policy. Therefore, it will be easy to identify if a policy had or did not have its intended affect.

Further discussion of the implications of the findings in this chapter and those that preceded it will be presented in the concluding remarks in chapter nine. However it is

becoming clear by this point that public school board governance is linked to measures of academic outcomes in meaningful ways in Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, Nevada, and Florida. Thought subtle differences between these groups of different states do reflect the localized nature of school board governance, the many common findings support the notion that governance is important in influencing academic achievement in in very different contexts. But first, I will take a brief look at a very different type of school board member; one representing a non-profit non-district charter school.

Chapter VIII.
Characteristics of a Sample of Non-Profit Charter School Boards

What is a charter school? Ask 100 people this question and it would not be surprising to get 100 different answers. Nor would it be unreasonable. According to the National Alliance for Public School Charter Schools, a national advocacy group, 42 U.S. states have a charter law. However these laws differ dramatically by, and even within, states (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). For example, the stat of Wisconsin has three distinct types of charter schools:

1) Instrumentality charter schools authorized by public school boards and staffed by school district employees;
2) Non-instrumentality charter schools authorized by public school boards and staffed by non-district (and usually non-unionized) employees; and
3) Non-instrumentality independent charter schools authorized by the City of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.

The general concept behind charter schools, however, is common across different states and types (Mintrom, 1997). The basic idea is that charter schools are public schools that are given a degree of freedom from school district and sometimes state policies in exchange for meeting performance targets spelled out in a contract between the school and the authorizing entity, be it a school board or not. Charter schools often develop their own curriculum, engage in their own budgeting, and hire and fire their own staff. Though there is intense political and research debate on whether charter schools in general actually fulfill their promise of increased outcomes in return for increased

autonomy, the basic goals and concepts underlying the charter school movement are clear (Witte et. al, 2007; Hoxby et. al., 2009).

Most research on charter school governance refers to the macro idea of shifting the oversight of public schools away from traditional public school boards and towards independent authorizers (Hall & Lake, 2006). This strain of research leaves a huge gap in understanding the micro-governance of charter schools. Consider again the case of Milwaukee. The City of Milwaukee common council authorizes several schools, and much attention is paid to the way in which that board chooses which non-profits to enter into chartering contracts with. But what about the non-profits to which contracts are given? They too have boards, but are generally not in current popular discussion of education governance.

This chapter, using limited evidence, seeks to open a new-line of scholarly inquiry on the way in which non-profit charter school boards oversee this unique subset of public schools. Though some of the non-profit literature on board governance can be applied to the case of charter schools, they are unique enough to warrant a sub-field in the area of non-profit board governance (Houle, 1989; Carver, 2006; Cornforth, 2003).

First, non-profit charter school boards not only are reliant on government revenue, but are defined specifically as public institutions in both the public discourse and state statutes (Merrifield, 2013). This unique tension puts charter schools in an undefined space between private and public. It follows that there is intense political debate over whether or not charter schools are indeed public institution, despite their officially defined status. While many non-profits are forced to defend their productivity with public dollars they rarely are expected to have to defend their status as public entities; in

fact one would suspect many non-profits would actively resist being defined as public entities.

Second, non-profit charter schools engage in forum shopping in a way that parallels non-profit grant seeking behavior, but fundamentally differs from it. Most non-profits obtain funding from either selling a service, applying for foundation and government support, or some combination of both (Seltzer, 2001). Non-profit charter schools may do these same things, but the bulk of their funding comes from government payments which the schools only become eligible for if they find an entity willing to authorize them. Where most non-profits might submit grant applications to several foundations, a non-profit charter school submits applications to several charter authorizing bodies. In other words the connection between government and the non-profit charter school is always mitigated through a middleman.

Third, it is very difficult if not impossible for non-profit charter schools to change their mission. They may modify it terms of the types of students they want to serve, but their basic mission will always be the education of students. At least in theory, a school struggling at this mission will lose its charter, thereby ceasing to be a non-profit charter school. So, any significant change in mission equates to no longer being a charter school.

Originally, I planned to compare the relationship between governance and academic outcomes on non-profit charter school boards and traditional public school boards. However, a low-survey response rate (just under eight percent of the 400 board members surveyed responded compared to 24% of public school board members) forced a shift in the research question. Instead of comparing the relationship between governance and outcomes on non-profit charter boards, I attempt to answer: Who serves

on non-profit charter school boards in Wisconsin and Michigan, what are their beliefs, and what do the descriptive statistics say about their status as "public" entities?

Background

Charter school board members in the states of Michigan and Wisconsin were chosen for this analysis due to the sizable number of non-district non-profit charter schools in these states. As can bee seen in Table 8.1, in 2012 Wisconsin had 18 non-district independent charter schools in operation while Michigan had 206. Under Wisconsin law independent charter schools may only be authorized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the City of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, or the Milwaukee Area Technical College (Merrifield, 2013). However, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside may only authorize a single school in Racine, and the Milwaukee Area Technical College has never acted upon its chartering authority. In Michigan universities and community colleges may authorize independent charter schools. Currently 11 institutions are authorizing 206 schools.

Table 8.1: Non-District Charter School Characteristics, 2012

	Wisconsin	**Michigan**
Non-district charter schools	18	206
Active charter school authorizers	3	11
Funding source	Dedicated appropriation	State education funding formula
Unionized	No	School-by-school basis
Teachers	Licensed by the state	Licensed and deemed "highly effective" under No Child Left Behind law. College faculty may teach without licensure
Funding level	$7,775 per-pupil	Variable
Location	Milwaukee and Racine	Statewide

Though there are variations in some of the structural characteristics of independent charter schools in both states, both share the common characteristic of being overseen by a board. Surveys were sent to the universe of independent school board members in theses state, but as mentioned less than eight percent were returned. Accordingly the following sections should be understood as an exploratory review of descriptive statistics rather than a representative sample of charter school board members in Michigan and Wisconsin.

Who Were the Survey Respondents?

The descriptive statistics in Tables 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4 detail the characteristics of survey respondents. A strong majority were male and White. Very few identified as liberals, like public school board respondents charter board respondents were generally conservative or moderate. Not surprisingly given the independent charter school board members are chosen rather then elected, only three had held elected office prior to their term on the board. The average age was 58, and the length of service was varied. Overall charter survey respondents looked very similar to public school board respondents: White males in their 50s who identify as conservative or moderate.

Table 8.2 – Characteristics of Charter Survey Respondents

Sex	N	Pct.
Male	19	73.1
Female	7	26.9
Race	N	Pct.
White	21	77.8
African-American	5	18.5
Prefer Not to Say	1	3.7
Ideology	N	Pct.
Liberal	4	14.8
Conservative	8	29.6
Moderate	13	48.2

Non-Partisan	2	7.4
Held Political Office Before	N	Pct.
Yes	3	11.5
No	23	88.5
Length of Service	N	Pct.
0-2 Years	6	22.2
3-4 Years	8	29.6
5-6 Years	6	22.2
More than 6 Years	7	25.9

Table 8.3 – Mean Age of Survey Respondents		
N	Mean	Std. Dev.
24	58	11.8

Also like public school board respondents, many charter school board member respondents were employed in the education and business sector, and highly educated. The sheer number of respondents with advanced degrees does raise some concern. It is possible that charter school board members in general are highly educated. However, it also could be a sign of response bias. While public school board members may have felt compelled to answer the survey because of their commitment to public service (a sentiment communicated to the author via e-mail by several respondents), charter board members may have been disproportionately compelled out of sympathy for a student seeking an advanced degree. This possibility is further supported by the way in which board members viewed their interactions with the public.

Table 8.4 – Backgrounds of Survey Respondents		
Job Type		
Education	8	40
Business	5	25
Labor	1	5
Professional (Law, Medicine,	4	20

etc.)		
Nonprofit	1	5
Other	1	5
Education Level		
Some College	1	4.6
Bachelor's Degree	3	13.6
Advanced Degree	18	81.8

What are the Governance Priorities of Survey Respondents?

As can be seen in Table 8.5, charter school board member respondents ranked interacting with the public as a very low-priority compared to other tasks. In comparison public school board respondents ranked interactions with the public considerably higher, 6.4 out of 10. The highest priority was placed on the setting of academic standards, and strategic planning.

Table 8.5 – How Do You Rank Priorities on a Scale of 1-10? (Selected Answers Only)

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Strategic Planning	18	2.6	1.8
Academic Standards	18	2.7	2
Interacting With Public	18	8.9	1.2

The priority ranking of charter board member respondents suggest a high internal focus on these boards. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Being freed from external pressures may enable greater focus on academic achievement. Perhaps more telling when asked if all board members shared a common definition of accountability 100% of respondents said yes. The results in Table 8.6 also suggest a high internal focus. Though board members agree that they listen to the ideas of the community, they disagree that community members or interest groups have significant influence over board decisions.

Boards also seem to be stable, with strong engagement in both frequent and consistent board development.

Table 8.6 – Charter Board Member Agreement with Statements where 1 = Strong Disagreement and 5 = Strong Agreement			
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Engage in Consistent Board Development	21	4	1.2
Collaboration with Interest Groups	17	2.1	1
Community Member Have Significant Influence	19	2.2	0.9
Our Board Listens to the Ideas of the Community	20	3.4	1.2
Our Board Engage in Frequent Board Development	20	3.5	1.3
Our Board has had Very Little Turnover in the Past Five Years	19	3.4	1.1

What are the Governance Behaviors of Survey Respondents?

Table 8.7 lists board member responses to a series of statements with which board members were asked to state their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale. Most striking is the complete absence of conflict. Respondents believe their boards are productive, cohesive, and highly cooperative. These responses differ greatly from the much larger public school board member sample, begging the question, are the differences from the small sample, or is their something inherently insular and different about non-profit charter school boards?

Table 8.7 – Charter Board Member Agreement with Board Descriptions where 1 = Strong Disagreement and 5 = Strong Agreement			
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
High Conflict	22	0.7	1.2
High Cooperation	22	3.6	0.7
Conflict is Productive	22	2.9	1.1
Disagreements Become Personalized	22	0.5	0.7
Coalitions form Among Predictable	22	0.5	0.6

Lines			
Prior Conflicts Resurface	22	0.9	1.2
Board has a Clear Leader	22	3.4	0.7
Board is Productive	22	3.4	0.7
Decisions are Supported Once Made	22	3.4	0.7

Conclusion and Discussion

As discussed the low-sample size makes any definitive conclusions, much less the deployment of any meaningful quantitative analysis, impossible. However, the limited evidence does give good reason to suspect that though non-profit charter school may be public by definition, their boards are far from public entities. There are obvious differences including the absence of electoral accountability and the protection of charter school boards from open-records laws. But the way in which these differences manifest in governance – high internal focus, low conflict, high levels of agreement, limited engagement with the public – warrants further study.

The obvious problem with the high internal focus is that significant amounts of public money, and the provision of a public good by entities accepted to be public bodies, is being overseen by boards that are far from public. While unelected special purpose public boards are commonplace, an unelected non-profit board is shielded from both electoral accountability *and* some of the accountability provided by public oversight. However charter boards are not completely free of monitoring. State agencies like the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction do keep close tabs on schools' finances and use bureaucratic authority to watch and sanction deficient schools.

I should note these critiques of charter school boards are not original; high profile academics such as education historian Diane Ravitch vocally question the public accountability of the charter school model. But the clearness in which some of the

critiques of the charter school model are supported in even limited survey results (as well as the comparatively low-response rate itself) support the need for further study of the role of non-profit school boards in the charter school accountability framework.

The greater potential weakness of the non-profit charter school board model is that the benefit of good governance on academic outcomes identified in previous chapters may be inaccessible to highly cohesive insular boards. The black box model of school board governance presented in Chapter Two argues that the situation dependent decisions crucial to governance success in the hyper-localized context of education requires the ability to understand the context in which a board is operating. An insular board, public or non-profit, is likely lacking this context. If insularity is a structural characteristic of non-profit charter boards, it may become a real obstacle to improving charter school academic outcomes. As more national charter school operators export their academic models to other states there lies a genuine risk that the charter model itself will be undone by stubborn adherence to a one best way line of thinking (Stillman, 1990; Hall & Lake, 2011).

The main conclusion from this chapter is that the micro-governance of non-profit charter schools deserves higher-scrutiny by the academic community. The limited survey results presented give good reason to suspect fundamental differences between the governance behavior of non-profit charter school board members and public school board members exist. Additional research is needed to find out exactly how these differences limit or enhance the potential of the charter school model to yield strong academic outcomes.

Chapter IX.
The Problem of the American School Board Revisited

The first chapter of this piece is titled *The Problem of the American School Board.* The problem of the American school board is more about perception than reality. No doubt there are school boards that do a poor job, but that is not, as some have claimed, reason to scrap the institution as a whole. The connections between governance and district academic performance identified and explored in the preceding chapters gives no reason to support the notion that democratically elected school boards are fundamentally flawed. The common finding across the groups in the comparative case-study design reveals the school board to be a flexible institution capable of effectiveness in very different situations precisely because there is no one best way to improve academic outcomes.

In this concluding chapter the problem posed in chapter one; that there is no consensus about what school boards should be doing, will be addressed. In addition the key findings of this dissertation will be reviewed, the many remaining unknowns will be addressed, and topics for future study on school board governance will be proposed.

What Should School Boards Be Doing?

A simple yet accurate answer to the question posed in the subsection title is that school boards should be governing. The black box model of school board governance described in chapter two serves as a theoretical guide for how board governance can impact academic outcomes. Accepting that there is no one best way to govern a school district and that in fact the key to educational success is making the right decision in the right way at the right time provides space for the unique role of democratically elected school boards in the broader field of education reform. No single canned set of education

reform strategies should be expected to raise academic outcomes in every situation; the long unsatisfying track record of well-intentioned education reform efforts bears out this reality.

The democratically elected school board provides a tried and true model for improving school district success. It is true that some of the historical functions of school boards, such as fiscal oversight and human relations, have become less important over time. However, school boards did for years serve these important functions because they were considered primarily a local concern, and the public understood that an elected board of flexible public servants was well positioned to oversee these functions in an accountable and acceptable manner. As increased unionization reduced board control of human resources, and as state and federal funding and revenue caps were enacted, it is only logical that boards shifted their focus.

The presented findings provide further evidence that school boards can and do impact district academic outcomes through their governance behaviors. Districts that show a commitment to board development and strategic planning, exercise close relations with the superintendent, minimize conflict and maximize cooperation, and minimize relationship conflict in particular oversee districts with higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates. And these attributes, at-least in Wisconsin, also have a positive effect on test score proficiency in certain subject areas.

The comparative case study design lends further heft to these finding despite it being a case study. The education environment faced by school boards in Utah, Florida, Nevada, and Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, are vastly different. Yet, the common positive impacts of minimizing conflict, focusing on vision and continuous improvement

through policy-setting and strategic planning, and good superintendent-board relations hold true across the groups of states. Notably, the negative relationship between interest group collaboration and academic outcomes is isolated to boards in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. This too suggests that state policy environments play a role in the governance-outcomes relationship.

But there is also much more to be discovered about school board governance and school district outcomes. In particular the relationship between governance and test score performance identified to a mild degree here and in other recent work demands more attention (Grissom, 2012). The relationship between board governance and academics is complex and continued improvement in the quality and comparability of standardized tests scores will enable future research to dig deeper into that complexity. For example, does board governance influence performance in certain areas i.e. math or reading, more than others?

The clear presence of interaction effects for board members with different professional backgrounds and lengths of service on school boards also reveals a complex relationship between certain types of board members and the impact of small group behavior. Better understanding how different personality types mitigate or increase the negative effects of conflict or positive effects of planning can better inform sitting board members of how best to govern for results in their specific governance context.

The next steps in school board governance research should focus on the collection of longitudinal school board data comparable to the snapshot data used in this study and further individual board case studies similar to those conducted by the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry in order to gain a better understanding of how manipulations to school board

governance changes academic outcomes over time. Understanding the role of school board governance in explaining variation in district level performance is necessary and practical for boards looking to improve outcomes. But more specific understanding of changes over time could go one step further and enable the creation of hyper-specific roadmaps for districts looking to improve outcomes through governance reform.

Finally, more needs to be known about non-profit charter school boards. The limited data obtained give good reason to suspect that they are very distinct creatures compared to public school boards. As charter reform efforts increase in number, a better understanding of what is gained, or lost, through this still new accountability framework is warranted.

How Can the Connection Between Board Governance and Outcomes Be Utilized?

Much discussion in this study has been dedicated to explaining how and why the institution of the school board can serve its role of maximizing academic output. But what lessons can individual boards, legislatures, and education reformers take from this dissertation?

The lessons for school boards are easy. If your board is adhering to the NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards,* continue to do so. Adherence to the concepts embedded in the Keys has a positive or neutral effect on graduation and dropout rates. Particular focus should be placed on relations with the superintendent, board development, and creation and frequent updating of a strategic plan. In addition boards should work to reduce conflict, particularly personal conflict, and be wary of collaboration with interest groups. Doing all these things is likely to yield district academic gains.

The lessons for state legislatures are more complicated. First, do not dismiss the potential of the elected school board. While there may be situations where global governance reforms are warranted the potential positives of the governance reform must be weighed against the established potential for school boards to add academic value. The assumption that democratic representation is the lone or dominant positive attribute of elected school boards is a false one. Legislators should also consider strategies to encourage better governance and consider intervention responses to poor governance.

For example, most public school districts receive a fiscal audit from the state at least once every three years; a board governance audit could go along with these fiscal audits to gauge the performance of the school board. Developing a framework for identifying board dysfunction in chronically low-performing districts could be a first step to meaningful interventions such as board development or forced turnover for struggling boards.

Education reformers should exercise caution in universally dismissing the democratically elected school board as an obstacle to education reform. It is demonstrably not an inherent obstacle. Sure, abolishing elected school boards would solve the problem of dysfunctional boards, but only at the expense of high-functioning boards that are having a positive impact on academic outcomes. Further, recognition that improving school board governance behavior is a potentially fruitful approach to improving academic performance is warranted. School boards deserve a place in the broad field of education reform.

Conclusion

The original survey data and extensive analysis in the preceding chapters and pages establish a connection between board governance and performance. If the reader takes one thing way from this study it should be that governance matters. Sometimes governance fails, sometimes it is irrelevant, but the capacity of small groups of diverse people to oversee organizations in ways that increase results – however defined – should not be dismissed. Boards are vehicles for human interaction and decision-making with the goal of providing oversight to an organization. Boards are flawed because humans are flawed, not because the concept, in education or elsewhere, is flawed. Or to put it another way, the American school board is not a problem. It is a solution.

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Appendix A.
School Board Survey Questions and Results: Public School Board Members Only

1. What is your sex?

	Pct.	N
Male	53.38	600
Female	46.62	524

n=1,124

2. Which best describes your race?

	Pct.	N
White	93.47	1,045
African-American	1.79	20
Hispanic	.45	5
Asian	.18	2
Native American	.72	8
Other	1.43	16
Prefer Not to Say	1.97	22

n=1,128

3. What is your age?

Mean	N
53.25	1,042

n=1,042

4. Would you identify yourself as:

	Pct.	N
Liberal	18.11	201
Conservative	32.61	362
Moderate	37.12	412
Non-Partisan	12.16	135

n=1,110

5. Do you share political beliefs with:

	Pct.	N
All of your fellow board members	6.07	67
Some of your fellow board members	69.57	768
Few of your fellow board	16.49	182

members		
None of your fellow board members	7.88	87

n=1,104

6. Have you held elected office prior to serving on your school board?

	Pct.	N
Yes	13.31	148
No	86.69	964

n=1,112

7. Do members of your board serve under term limits?

	Pct.	N
Yes	32.26	359
No	67.74	754

n=1,113

8. How long have you served on your school board?

	Pct.	N
0-2 years	19.79	222
3-4 years	19.07	214
5-6 years	14.35	161
More than six years	46.79	525

n=1,122

9. In your last election did you have an opponent?

	Pct.	N
Yes	63.80	712
No	36.20	1,116

n=1,116

10. Do you have a job outside of the school board?

	Pct.	N
Yes	76.83	859
No	23.17	259

n=1,118

11. If yes, which best describes the nature of your non-school board job?

	Pct.	N
Education	15.84	96
Business/commerce	25.41	154
Labor/production	2.48	15
Transportation	1.98	12
Farming/fishing/forestry	4.62	28
Sales	6.27	38
Construction	3.63	22
Professional services (law, medicine, etc.)	17.82	108
Nonprofit	5.28	32
Government	9.41	57
Homemaker	.50	3
Other	6.77	41

n=606

12. Which best describes your education level?

	Pct.	N
Did not complete high school	.12	1
High school Graduate or GED	3.92	32
Some college or other post-secondary education/ training (including AA or AS degree)	24.26	198
Bachelor's degree	34.19	279
Advanced degree (MA, MS, Ph.D., Ed.D., MD, JD, DVM, etc.)	37.50	306

n=816

13. Have you ever been employed as a teacher in your district?

	Pct.	N
Yes	12.53	102
No	87.47	712

n=814

How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

14. My school district has adopted a performance budgeting process. Programs must show and document activities and levels of program success in order to continue receiving current levels of funding.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	6.04	49
Agreement	26.26	213

Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	31.44	255
Disagreement	30.70	249
Strong, intense disagreement	5.55	45

n=811

15. Conflict among some school board members is high.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	6.64	54
Agreement	15.50	126
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	15.99	130
Disagreement	37.39	304
Strong, intense disagreement	24.48	199

n=813

16. Cooperation among school board members is high.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	30.26	246
Agreement	48.71	396
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	14.39	117
Disagreement	4.80	39
Strong, intense disagreement	1.85	15

n=813

17. Disagreements between board members often become personalized.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	5.32	43
Agreement	12.61	102
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	13.60	110
Disagreement	34.98	283
Strong, intense disagreement	33.50	271

n=809

18. Conflict over issues on the school board usually results in a clear solution to the problem.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	10.07	82

Agreement	49.14	400
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	26.78	218
Disagreement	11.18	91
Strong, intense disagreement	2.83	23

n=814

19. School board coalitions (two or more individual members joining forces) tend to form along predictable lines (e.g. political party, male/female, etc.)

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	8.12	66
Agreement	21.65	176
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	20.42	166
Disagreement	31.49	256
Strong, intense disagreement	18.33	149

n=813

20. During board negotiations, prior conflicts often resurface.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	4.05	33
Agreement	18.18	148
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	20.64	168
Disagreement	37.96	309
Strong, intense disagreement	19.16	156

n=814

21. The school board has a clear leader.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	17.86	145
Agreement	39.78	323
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	25.37	206
Disagreement	13.55	110
Strong, intense disagreement	3.45	28

n=812

22. The clear board leader is also the board president.

	Pct.	N

Strong, intense agreement	18.30	149
Agreement	33.17	270
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	27.03	220
Disagreement	16.22	132
Strong, intense disagreement	5.28	43

n=814

23. The board is highly productive.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	23.51	190
Agreement	49.50	400
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	17.57	142
Disagreement	7.43	60
Strong, intense disagreement	1.98	16

n=808

24. Board decisions are supported by all members once made.

	Pct.	N
Strong, intense agreement	28.62	233
Agreement	45.82	373
Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement	12.65	103
Disagreement	10.07	82
Strong, intense disagreement	2.83	23

n=814

25. How often do you meet as a board?

	Pct.	N
Less than Once a Month	.12	1
Once a Month	38.07	311
2-3 Times a Month	57.53	470
More than 3 Times a Month	4.28	35

n=817

26. Do you think your fellow board members share your definition of accountability as it relates to academic outcomes in your district?

	Pct.	N
Yes	79.92	605

No	152	20.08

n=757

27. Please rank the following topics in order of your school board's priority.

	Mean Rank	N
Strategic Planning	3.44	762
Setting Academic Standards	3.38	762
Making Assessment Policies	5.44	762
Making Student Behavior Policies	6.36	762
Hiring the Superintendent	4.89	762
Holding School Staff Accountable for District Performance	5.70	762
Collaborating with Interest Groups	8.07	762
Interacting with the Public	6.38	762
Board Development	7.68	762
Monitoring Fiscal Performance	3.67	762

28. Which best describes the way in which your board governs?

	Pct.	N
The board governs and oversees operations through committees established along functional lines (finance, human resources, programs) but delegates the management functions to the superintendent	3.39	27
The board manages, governs and performs the work of the organization.	3.02	24
The board governs through policies that establish organizational aims (ends), governance approaches, and management limitations. These policies also should define the relationship of the board with the superintendent. The superintendent broad freedom to determine the means that will be used to achieve organizational aims.	54.15	431
The board manages operations through functional committees that may or may not have a staff coordinator.	39.45	314

n=796

How much do the following statements describe the members of your board?

29. Members take responsibility for past decisions.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	2.98	24

Little	6.08	49
Some	28.91	233
Greatly	49.75	401
Very Greatly	12.28	99

n=806

30. Members freely admit when they are wrong.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	8.29	67
Little	13.37	108
Some	44.06	356
Greatly	28.34	229
Very Greatly	5.94	48

n=808

31. Members can take each other at their word

	Pct.	N
Very Little	3.72	30
Little	5.70	46
Some	24.41	197
Greatly	42.50	343
Very Greatly	23.67	191

n=807

32. Members do what they say they will do.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	2.72	22
Little	3.84	31
Some	23.51	190
Greatly	51.86	419
Very Greatly	18.07	146

n=808

33. Members willingly try new things without fear of ridicule.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	4.60	37
Little	9.32	75
Some	35.03	282
Greatly	38.88	313

Very Greatly	12.17	98

n=805

34. Members willingly try new things without fear of retribution.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	3.97	32
Little	9.05	73
Some	31.35	252
Greatly	41.26	333
Very Greatly	14.37	116

n=807

35. Members are open about how they feel about other members' preferences.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	3.47	28
Little	13.99	113
Some	40.84	330
Greatly	34.28	277
Very Greatly	7.43	60

n=808

36. Members are open about their own preferences.

	Pct.	N
Very Little	1.73	14
Little	3.22	26
Some	26.27	212
Greatly	52.42	423
Very Greatly	16.36	132

n=807

Please choose the extent to which each of these statements describes your board

37. We do not regularly update our strategic plan.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	40.18	321
Describes a little bit	19.65	157
Somewhat describes	22.28	178
Describes a great deal	12.02	96

Perfectly describes	5.88	47

n=799

38. We engage in planning when the academic and/or fiscal direction of the district needs to be changed.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	13.03	104
Describes a little bit	12.78	102
Somewhat describes	23.93	191
Describes a great deal	38.35	306
Perfectly describes	11.90	95

n=798

39. We engage in strategic planning at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	20.91	166
Describes a little bit	18.01	143
Somewhat describes	27.58	219
Describes a great deal	23.30	185
Perfectly describes	10.20	81

n=794

40. We engage in continuous strategic planning, our plan is frequently updated

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	20.78	165
Describes a little bit	17.00	135
Somewhat describes	22.04	175
Describes a great deal	24.81	197
Perfectly describes	15.37	122

n=794

41. We use the academic standards set by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	2.27	18
Describes a little bit	5.18	41
Somewhat describes	19.44	154
Describes a great deal	53.03	420

Perfectly describes	20.08	159

n=792

42. We set and tweak district academic standards in response to student needs.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	10.18	81
Describes a little bit	11.93	95
Somewhat describes	26.38	210
Describes a great deal	38.82	309
Perfectly describes	12.69	101

n=796

43. We set and update district academic standards at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	25.98	206
Describes a little bit	20.18	160
Somewhat describes	23.83	189
Describes a great deal	24.09	191
Perfectly describes	5.93	47

n=793

44. We consistently set academic standards more rigorous than those required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	15.45	123
Describes a little bit	13.69	109
Somewhat describes	25.75	205
Describes a great deal	26.51	211
Perfectly describes	18.59	148

n=796

45. We solely use standardized tests required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	32.58	258
Describes a little bit	17.68	140
Somewhat describes	25.76	204
Describes a great deal	17.42	138

Perfectly describes	6.57	52

n=792

46. We set and tweak district assessment policies in response to student needs. For example, if we see our students struggling in math we will increase the use of math assessments.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	9.13	72
Describes a little bit	13.94	110
Somewhat describes	29.15	230
Describes a great deal	36.88	291
Perfectly describes	10.90	86

n=789

47. We set and update district standardized assessment policies at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	22.11	174
Describes a little bit	21.22	167
Somewhat describes	30.50	240
Describes a great deal	22.36	176
Perfectly describes	3.81	30

n=787

48. We consistently use standardized assessments that are more rigorous than those required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction). We also use student portfolios and/or alternative ways to measure student performance.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	12.93	102
Describes a little bit	16.98	134
Somewhat describes	25.35	200
Describes a great deal	29.40	232
Perfectly describes	15.34	121

n=789

49. We use the behavior policies required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	10.39	80
Describes a little bit	17.53	135

Somewhat describes	31.04	239
Describes a great deal	34.03	262
Perfectly describes	7.01	54

n=770

50. We set and tweak district student behavior policies in response to incidents.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	9.92	77
Describes a little bit	19.59	152
Somewhat describes	32.09	249
Describes a great deal	31.44	244
Perfectly describes	6.96	54

n=776

51. We set and update district student behavior policies at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	20.03	160
Describes a little bit	16.93	130
Somewhat describes	25.65	197
Describes a great deal	28.12	216
Perfectly describes	8.46	65

n=768

52. We set and consistently update student district behavior policies that are more rigorous than those required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	12.48	96
Describes a little bit	13.91	107
Somewhat describes	27.96	215
Describes a great deal	30.95	238
Perfectly describes	14.69	113

n=769

53. We rarely change superintendents (or principal if a charter board). When we do we look for someone local.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	36.75	287

Describes a little bit	20.36	159
Somewhat describes	21.00	164
Describes a great deal	14.85	116
Perfectly describes	7.04	55

n=781

54. We conduct a broad search for a superintendent (or principal if a charter board) with expertise on the pressing needs of our district.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	11.42	89
Describes a little bit	8.86	69
Somewhat describes	19.77	154
Describes a great deal	36.33	283
Perfectly describes	23.62	184

n=779

55. We tend to hire a new superintendent (or principal if a charter board) at regular intervals, such as once every five years of after a board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	81.84	640
Describes a little bit	8.57	67
Somewhat describes	5.75	45
Describes a great deal	2.81	22
Perfectly describes	1.02	8

n=782

56. We look for a superintendent (or principal if a charter board) that shares the values of, and is willing to be a collaborator with, the school board.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	6.92	54
Describes a little bit	4.87	38
Somewhat describes	13.72	107
Describes a great deal	37.82	295
Perfectly describes	36.67	286

n=780

57. We primarily support and defend the decisions of the Superintendent (or principal if a charter board).

	Pct.	N

Does not describe at all	1.53	12
Describes a little bit	6.39	50
Somewhat describes	15.71	123
Describes a great deal	56.32	441
Perfectly describes	20.05	157

n=783

58. We support and defend the decisions of the Superintendent (or principal if a charter board) until concerns with those decisions arise.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	16.18	127
Describes a little bit	17.83	140
Somewhat describes	20.64	162
Describes a great deal	34.78	273
Perfectly describes	10.57	83

n=785

59. We allow the Superintendent (or principal if a charter board) to manage the district as he or she sees fit, but regularly monitor and review his or her performance.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	4.83	38
Describes a little bit	6.36	50
Somewhat describes	15.01	118
Describes a great deal	42.49	334
Perfectly describes	31.30	246

n=786

60. We view the Superintendent (or principal if a charter board) as a full partner in the governing process.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	2.41	19
Describes a little bit	6.59	52
Somewhat describes	10.90	86
Describes a great deal	39.80	314
Perfectly describes	40.30	318

n=789

61. Organized interest groups have significant influence over board decisions.

	Pct.	N

Does not describe at all	45.34	355
Describes a little bit	32.69	256
Somewhat describes	13.03	102
Describes a great deal	6.90	54
Perfectly describes	2.04	16

n=783

62. We regularly listen to the ideas of organized interest groups and act on their input when we deem it appropriate.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	13.14	103
Describes a little bit	24.49	192
Somewhat describes	31.38	246
Describes a great deal	24.87	195
Perfectly describes	6.12	48

n=784

63. Organized interest groups are generally only active during board elections.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	49.43	387
Describes a little bit	25.42	199
Somewhat describes	14.56	114
Describes a great deal	8.43	66
Perfectly describes	2.17	17

n=783

64. We do not consider the input of organized interest groups when making board decisions.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	45.07	352
Describes a little bit	24.71	193
Somewhat describes	17.54	137
Describes a great deal	9.22	72
Perfectly describes	3.46	27

n=781

65. Community members have significant influence over board decisions.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	17.90	140

Describes a little bit	32.86	257
Somewhat describes	32.35	253
Describes a great deal	15.60	122
Perfectly describes	1.28	10

n=782

66. We regularly listen to the ideas of community members and act on their input when we deem it appropriate.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	2.42	19
Describes a little bit	11.73	92
Somewhat describes	26.66	209
Describes a great deal	48.60	381
Perfectly describes	10.59	83

n=784

67. We do not consider the input of community members when making board decisions.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	73.50	574
Describes a little bit	15.49	121
Somewhat describes	7.17	56
Describes a great deal	3.07	24
Perfectly describes	.77	6

n=781

68. We do not engage in any formal board development.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	45.47	356
Describes a little bit	20.56	161
Somewhat describes	19.28	151
Describes a great deal	9.45	74
Perfectly describes	5.24	41

n=783

69. We engage in board development activities when obvious dysfunction arises.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	39.95	310
Describes a little bit	21.39	166
Somewhat describes	23.84	185

Describes a great deal	11.98	93
Perfectly describes	2.84	22

n=776

70. We engage in board development activities at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	31.27	242
Describes a little bit	20.16	156
Somewhat describes	25.06	194
Describes a great deal	17.31	134
Perfectly describes	6.20	48

n=774

71. We frequently and consistently engage in board development activities.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	24.77	192
Describes a little bit	18.19	141
Somewhat describes	18.45	143
Describes a great deal	21.55	167
Perfectly describes	17.03	132

n=775

72. We follow the fiscal practices mandated by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	2.57	20
Describes a little bit	4.89	38
Somewhat describes	17.89	139
Describes a great deal	48.13	374
Perfectly describes	26.51	206

n=777

73. We set and tweak district fiscal practices in response to problems.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	5.78	45
Describes a little bit	10.78	84
Somewhat describes	23.75	185
Describes a great deal	43.90	342

Perfectly describes	15.79	123

n=779

74. We set and update district fiscal policies at regular intervals, such as every five years or after each board election.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	25.06	194
Describes a little bit	16.02	124
Somewhat describes	23.51	182
Describes a great deal	25.58	198
Perfectly describes	9.82	76

n=774

75. We set and consistently update district fiscal policies that are more rigorous than those required by the State Board of Education (or Department of Public Instruction).

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	11.34	87
Describes a little bit	12.78	98
Somewhat describes	22.43	172
Describes a great deal	35.59	273
Perfectly describes	17.86	137

n=767

76. In the past five years our school board has had very little board member turnover.

	Pct.	N
Does not describe at all	21.90	171
Describes a little bit	16.52	129
Somewhat describes	20.49	160
Describes a great deal	21.77	170
Perfectly describes	19.33	151

n=781

Which best describes how your board handles....

77. Financial Decisions

	Pct.	N
The board as a whole deliberates and makes decisions	40.75	319
The board makes decisions based on committee recommendations	30.40	238
The board delegates decisions making authority to the	10.98	86

superintendent (or principal if a charter board)		
The board follows its established policies when making decisions	17.88	140

n=783

78. Personnel Decisions

	Pct.	N
The board as a whole deliberates and makes decisions	12.63	99
The board makes decisions based on committee recommendations	20.03	157
The board delegates decisions making authority to the superintendent (or principal if a charter board)	48.60	381
The board follows its established policies when making decisions	18.75	147

n=784

79. Decisions about the academic direction of the district

	Pct.	N
The board as a whole deliberates and makes decisions	25.26	196
The board makes decisions based on committee recommendations	26.68	207
The board delegates decisions making authority to the superintendent (or principal if a charter board)	31.70	246
The board follows its established policies when making decisions	16.37	127

n=776

80. Decisions regarding the public perception of the district

	Pct.	N
The board as a whole deliberates and makes decisions	51.48	400
The board makes decisions based on committee recommendations	15.19	118
The board delegates decisions making authority to the superintendent (or principal if a charter board)	18.28	142
The board follows its established policies when making decisions	15.06	117

n=777

81. Decisions regarding interactions with state government

	Pct.	N
The board as a whole deliberates and makes decisions	29.65	231
The board makes decisions based on committee recommendations	10.65	83
The board delegates decisions making authority to the superintendent (or principal if a charter board)	42.11	328
The board follows its established policies when making decisions	17.59	137

n=779

82. Using the continuum below, indicate who bears responsibility for the following organizational functions, where:

-5 means the Board is fully responsible for the function;
0 means the Board and Superintendent (or principal if a charter board) equally share responsibility for the function; and
5 means the Superintendent (or principal if a charter board) is fully responsible for the function.

	Mean	N
Day-to-Day Operational Management	4.42	788
On-Going Financial Management	2.23	662
Strategic Planning	.39	580
Stakeholder and Public Relations	.89	584
Program Evaluation	2.45	683
Public Advocacy	.34	565

Appendix B.
Survey Solicitation Letter

Dear School Board Member,

We invite you to take part in a survey of decision-making on school boards in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Utah, Florida, and Nevada. You were selected due to your position as a school board member in one of these states. While your participation is **voluntary**, we would greatly appreciate your assistance. Included in the e-mail is a link to an online survey. If you prefer to receive a paper survey, please e-mail Michael Ford at mford@uwm.edu with your address, and a paper survey will be mailed. We are seeking to understand the experiences and characteristics of school board members. We recognize the sensitive nature of many of the questions we have asked. We want to assure you that your responses will remain **strictly confidential**. No individual board or board member information will be released. Also, given the complexity of the issues being addressed, the questionnaire may take you about twenty minutes to complete. We are confident that you will find many of our questions interesting and will want to know what we have found out from all the school boards studied. The deadline for completing the survey is important for our research. **Please complete and submit online by April 15, 2013.**

There are no known risks associated with your participating in this study, other than the discomfort you may experience when answering what may be awkward questions about board dynamics. Possible benefits are that you will learn, from the results of this research, more about the decision-making processes used by other boards. PLEASE DO NOT INPUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE ON THE SURVEY.

If you have any questions about this research please contact Michael Ford using the information below:

Michael Ford
Doctoral Student, Urban Studies
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
3835 S. Herman Street
Milwaukee, WI 53207
414-803-2162
mford@uwm.edu

This study was received IRB approval on February 19, 2013, IRB# 13.275. If you have any complaints about your experience as a participant in this study, please call or write:

Melissa Spadanuda
IRB Administrator
University Safety and Assurances
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
P.O. Box 413, Engelmann 270
Milwaukee, WI 53201
Phone: 414-229-3173

Fax: 414-229-6729
www.irb.uwm.edu

Although Ms. Spadanuda will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

Thank you so much for your contribution to knowledge in this area.

Sincerely,

Michael Ford and Douglas Ihrke

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
Consent to Participate in Online Survey Research

Study Title: The Impact of School Board Governance Behavior on Academic Achievement in Diverse States

Person Responsible for Research: Douglas Ihrke and Michael Ford

Study Description: The purpose of this research study is to better understand how school board governance affects academic achievement in diverse policy environments. Approximately 9,600 subjects will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey that will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. The questions will ask you about your background, your experiences as a school board member, and your relationships with other school board members and district personnel.

Risks / Benefits: Risks to participants are considered minimal. Survey respondents may expect some psychological discomfort. The questions contained in the survey instrument are of a sensitive nature in the sense that the subject matter is the relationships and interactions within groups of which the participants are all members. Collection of data and survey responses using the internet involves the same risks that a person would encounter in everyday use of the internet (such as breach of confidentiality). While the researchers have taken every reasonable step to protect your confidentiality, there is always the possibility of interception or hacking of the data by third parties that is not under the control of the research team.

There will be no costs for participating. There are no benefits to you other than to further research.

Limits to Confidentiality

Identifying information such as your school district will be collected for purposes of linking your Reponses, and those of your colleagues to district financial and academic performance data. Your responses will be treated as confidential and all reasonable efforts will be made so that no individual participant will be identified with his/her

answers. Data will be retained on the Qualtrics website server for on year and will be deleted after this time. However, data may exist on backups or server logs beyond the timeframe of this research project. Data transferred from the survey site will be saved in an encrypted format indefinitely. Only three people, the PI, student PI, and study staff will have access to the data collected by this study. The research team will remove your identifying information after linking the data and all study results will be reported without identifying information so that no one viewing the results will ever be able to match you with your responses.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not answer any of the questions or withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Your decision will not change any present or future relationship with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

Who do I contact for questions about the study: For more information about the study or study procedures, contact Douglas Ihrke at dihrke@uwm.edu.

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject? Contact the UWM IRB at 414-229-3173 or irbinfo@uwm.edu. This study was approved on February 19, 2013, IRB# 13.275.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
By entering this survey, you are indicating that you have read the consent form, you are age 18 or older and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Thank you!

CURRICULUM VITAE

Michael Ford

EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee — May 2008
M.A. Political Science
Masters Paper: "*Graduation Rates and Market Share in the Milwaukee Public Schools"*

May 2004

Marquette University
B.A. Political Science
Cum Laude

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee — Fall 2012
Teaching Assistant to Douglas Ihrke, Ph.D.
Political Science 763: Scope and Dynamics of Public Administration

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee — Spring 2012
Associate Lecturer – Urban Studies Program
Urban Studies 360: Technology and the City

Fall 2011

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Associate Lecturer – Urban Studies Program
Urban Studies 250: Exploring the Urban Environment

Spring 2011

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Teaching Assistant – Urban Studies Program
Urban Studies 250: Exploring the Urban Environment

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Wisconsin Policy Research Institute — September 2011-present
Director of Research
Hartland, WI

School Choice Wisconsin — June 2008-September 2011
Vice-President of Operations
Milwaukee, WI

School Choice Wisconsin — September 2004-June 2008
Research Associate

Milwaukee, WI

Jason Fields for Wisconsin 11th Assembly District Fall 2006, Fall 2008
Campaign Manager/Consultant
Milwaukee, WI

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS

"School Exits in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Evidence of a Marketplace?" *Journal of School Choice,* 2011 5:2 182 – 204.

"School Choice Legislation: Impact Assessment and Fiscal Notes." *Journal of School Choice,* 2013 7:1 37 – 60. Co-authored with John Merrifield.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

"An Overview of Milwaukee's K-12 Education System," Book Chapter in *Pathway to Success for Milwaukee Schools,* Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, June 2013.

"Understanding School Finance in Wisconsin: A Primer." *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute,* May 2013.

"The Impact of Disruptive Students in Wisconsin School Districts." *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute,* April, 2013.

"Diane Ravitch's Divisive Point of View." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* January 18, 2013.

"MPS Wisely Embracing Charter Schools." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* September 15, 2012

"Using Value-Added Analysis to Raise Student Achievement in Wisconsin." *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute*, June 2012. Co-authored with Sarah Archibald.

"MPS' Looming Fiscal Crack-Up." *Wisconsin Interest Magazine,* July 2012.

"A Modern Teacher Compensation System for Wisconsin." *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute*, January 2012.

"How to Deal with State's School Wake-Up Call." *Madison Capital Times,* June 11, 2012. Co-authored with Sarah Archibald.

"Education Wake-Up Call is Looming." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* June 5, 2012. Co-authored with Sarah Archibald.

"Milwaukee's Lessons for Madison Prep." *Capital Times,* Madison, WI, December 16, 2011.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"The Impact of the Release of Test Scores on Enrollment Patterns in Milwaukee's School Voucher Program." *71st Midwest Political Science Association Political Science Conference,* Chicago, IL. April 2013.

"Governing For Results On a Post-Collective Bargaining Wisconsin School Board." *43rd Annual Urban Affairs Association Conference*, San Francisco, CA. April 2013.

"School Choice Legislation: Impact Assessment and Fiscal Notes." Annual *Conference of the Southern Economics Association,* New Orleans, LA. November 2012 with Dr. John Merrifield.

"The Impact of School Board Gender Representation on K–12 Fiscal and Academic Outcomes." *42nd Annual Urban Affairs Association Conference*, Pittsburgh, PA. April, 2012.

"School Board Gender Representation and Fiscal and Academic Outcomes." *17th Annual University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Urban Studies Forum.* April 2012.

"School Choice Legislation: Impact Assessment and Fiscal Notes." *International School Choice and Reform Conference,* Fort Lauderdale, FL. January 2012 with Dr. John Merrifield.

"School Exits in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Evidence of a Marketplace?" at the 41st Annual Urban Affairs Association Conference in New Orleans: March, 2011.

OTHER PRESENTATIONS/MEDIA APPEARANCES

Guest on Lake Effect, WUWM Milwaukee, April 18, 2013. Topic: The impact of disruptive students on K-12 education.

Panelist at the 2012 Midwest Catholic Education Advocate Conference at Marquette University, July 12, 2012.

"Milwaukee K-12 Education," Presented at the 2012 Alliance for Catholic Education Parental Choice Symposium: Marquette University, June 15, 2012.

"Independent Charter School Per-Pupil Payments: Projections and Policy Options." Presented at the Milwaukee Charter School Advocates Seminar Number One, June 27, 2012.

Appearance on Eau Claire, WI WEAU News, "Could Wisconsin Interstates Become Tollways?" February 13, 2012

"Wisconsin's Economy and the Public Mood," Presented at the Wisconsin Counties Association 2012 Legislative Exchange, February 7, 2012.

Guest on UpFront with Mike Gousha, WISN Milwaukee, January 15, 2012. Topic: Teacher compensation policies.

Panelist at the Illinois Policy Institute Vouchers and the Future of Education in Illinois discussion in Chicago, IL: Feb. 5, 2010.

Guest on WGN Radio's Milt Rosenberg show: September 21, 2009. Topic: Education reform.

Guest on Wisconsin Public Radio's Conversations with Kathleen Dunn: February 28, 2008. Topic: Milwaukee education research.

Presenter at the American Legislative Exchange Council School Choice Academy in Salt Lake City: June 14, 2008.

DISCIPLINE SERVICE/AWARDS

Peer Reviewer, SAGE Open	April 2013
2012 Urban Affairs Association Conference Volunteer	April 2012
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Urban Studies Dissertation Research Grant	Awarded April 28, 2012
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Urban Studies Graduate Teaching Fellow	2011-2012

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Political Science Association
American Society for Public Administration
Southern Economics Association
Urban Affairs Association